

Robert Ulich

# Creativity or The Few and the Many

One of the responsibilities of education is the discovery and cultivation of talent or the *fostering and support of creativity*. When danger threatens a society, the salvation always lies in the emergence of a few who understand the warning voice of history, acknowledge the necessity of change, and transform the fear into a sense of challenge. When, as at the end of antiquity, such men fail to arise, or, so far as they exist, are not supported by their contemporaries, decay is imminent. Therefore, we will discuss the characteristics of the creative personality, for unless the schools are able to recognize it in time and to stimulate it, they kill the most precious elements in their society. How often have they done so!

At least seven rather general characteristics distinguish the creative, from the average, personality. They are so interwoven that they defy any attempt at sharp separation; yet, our conceptual language has no other means to elucidate the complex but to illuminate the parts.

First, the creative person possesses a high degree of *spontaneity*, an inner energy drives him forward. We hope modern research will tell us more about this quality in the future, for the relation between mental phenomena and the chemistry of the body is no longer the secret it was twenty years ago. We also know that the gift of creative spontaneity, though ultimately outside our will, can be cultivated through exercise and endurance. The enduring strength of the genius, however, is not that of an athlete. Many great men lived in a fragile frame. The German poet Friedrich Schiller protested his many sicknesses with the obstinate words: "It is the soul that builds itself the body" (*Es ist der Geist, der sich den Körper baut*").

And so might have said Erasmus of Rotterdam, Blaise Pascal, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charles Steinmetz, and Eve Curie. They all are paradigms of that interaction between psyche and soma which, under the influence of mechanical concepts of science, we have neglected for a long time but about which the ancient Indians already had profound intuitions.

The spontaneity of a creative person is enhanced by his second quality, that of *sensitivity*. Both spontaneity and sensitivity are like fine edges by virtue of which the mind cuts into the dim mass of the unknown. In many languages, all those words which denote sharpness and its antonym, bluntness, have metaphorical meaning. We speak of a "sharp" and "incisive" intellect and of a "dull" and "blunt" mind. Like spontaneity, sensitivity is in no way a passive response to the stimuli of the environment. The physical organs that connect us with the outer world — the ear that hears, the eye that sees, and the skin that reacts to touch — are not merely receivers. They work only because of their interaction with a marvelously developed nerve and brain system. Therefore, any comparison with mechanical instruments, such as radar or a computer, or with the sensitiveness of animals (which in many species is, in particular respects, higher than ours) is fallacious, because in man impressions received from outside or from within can be transformed into questions and the questions into concepts.

How this transformation of prehensions into concepts and meanings comes about, or how unconscious life changes into self-conscious and even self-critical life, is one of the great riddles of evolution. We do not know what thinking is.

Whenever sensitivity passes from mere sensory impressions into more lasting experiences, it is accompanied by emotions, just as air blown into a flute is accompanied by a tone. We can be deeply moved also by nature, but except in cases of insanity all human existence is primarily interhuman existence — all personal life is interpersonal life — and such life is either sympathetic and cooperative, hostile or loveless, or lived in an atmosphere of brute apathy, which is the worst type of life.

The high degree of sensitivity characteristic of the creative mind renders its possessor highly susceptible to the plenitude of tragic and often unkind human events. His experiences refuse to remain on the surface; they may cut deeply into his

soul. Instead of dismissing them lightly, he dwells upon them with intense joy and love or with intense sorrow and despair. His world is richer for this reason, but it is also more fraught with danger. He may be irritable and inclined toward depressive moods.

How — this is our third question — can the creative individual defend himself against himself? Only through a heightened degree of *self-discipline* that teaches him to conserve his energy for purposes conducive to his further development. He is too rich to be a moralist, but he does not dissipate himself. Conscious of his own value and of the value of every member of humanity, he maintains his integrity in the midst of inner and outer turbulence. He may be overwhelmed by passion, because there is a deep connection between creativity and excitability — perhaps also sexuality. But his urge toward form and meaningful expression will turn even failure and immorality into productivity. If it were not for the great “sinners” from Saint Augustine to Rousseau, Goethe, Balzac, and Wilde, man would be more ignorant about himself than he is.

From disciplined reflection on the value of experience the creative person develops, as his fourth outstanding quality, a sense of *purposefulness*. Whereas most people are pushed by concatenations of external circumstances (outer directed, as one says today), the creative person creates his own goal. He rigorously rejects that which does not fit into the curve of his life. Only assimilable impressions are retained. Thus, the paradox emerges that the genius — known to be excitable, bounteous, and overgenerous — is at the same time a careful steward of his talent.

These considerations force upon us a fifth distinction of the creative mind: *imagination, intuition, or inventiveness* (the three terms may be used interchangeably). He reaches beyond the immediate and obvious to arrive at insights closed to ordinary men, because more than others he senses the inner kinship between all things existing — hence the astounding ease and wealth of his associations, of his metaphorical thinking and language, irrespective of whether he speaks as a statesman, a scholar, or an artist.

To be sure, everyone who thinks within wide circles shows some degree of imagination. However, in the spontaneous and sensitive individual imagination assumes a degree of unusual intensity and suddenness of result. It is a gift that comes from

inner spheres — rich, turbulent and often nebulous in their state of birth. They lie below the level of analytical thinking. Although imagination can be cultivated to a degree, it cannot be commanded. All mental acts have something enigmatic about them, but the intuitional are most enigmatic of all.

An aesthetic component works in all intuitiveness that can best be illustrated by reference to the work of the artist. According to common opinion, the artist belongs to the eminently intuitive types, consequently, more than other mortals he is susceptible to the ever changing facets of life. Fascinated by the charm, the color, and the form of men and things, he easily falls prey to contradictory moods. He is considered to be careless about conventions and money and to be more impulsive than reliable in his political opinions.

But the frequent notion of the artist as a kind of bohemian is one-sided. It fails to see that the artist pays for his sensitivity by his exposure to the heights and abysses of experience and by their often tortuous transformation into a finished work, admired by his contemporaries, or perhaps rejected until later generations awaken to it. Like Dante in the *Divine Comedy*, he may pass from limbo to hell and not even have a Virgil as his mentor. And while Dante finally arrives at heaven, many an artist will not. On the battlefield of life, the genius is alone — as Dante was himself — if only for the reason that he is ahead of others.

But intuition is not merely a form of quick apprehension of the unknown and unformed or a sudden feeling of release from pent-up tensions and emotions. In order to be creative, intuition needs a built-in structure, or "logic," which is the result of mental discipline. It may be felt or not felt during the creative act, but it must nevertheless be there. A mere brainstorm is not an intuition. Only to the mind endowed with the virtue of order will the deeper orders of life open their gates.

The gift of intuition is in no way the monopoly of the artist. It is present whenever new light appears on the horizons of humanity, in religion, in philosophy, in science, and in the fields of action. No doubt, the scholar has to follow rigorous methods of inquiry, but in order to be more than descriptive, or analytical, he also needs the gift of inventiveness. Each new step in the art of inquiry results from a mixture of knowledge, meticulousness, and intuition. Quantitatively speaking, the scholar of genius may not know more than his equally learned contemporaries, but he is able to use the known

as a springboard to the unknown. There, not in knowledge as such, lies his excellence.

Even more than the scholar, the statesman seems to be bound by a chain of cause and effect, subject to pressures which leave little room for the flight of intuition. Yet, every statesman of historical stature has made decisions that were not merely the aggregate of previous observations and deliberations but based on intelligent guesses within the undeterminateness of great historical moments. President Kennedy's resolve about the Russian missiles in Cuba was of that nature.

The subtle kinship between the mind of the great statesman and the artistic-intuitive type explains also the fact that great political leaders are often impressive speakers and also writers of high achievement; Caesar, Napoléon, Bismarck, Churchill, and Lincoln come to mind. Certainly, the charisma of political leadership, as of any kind of leadership, arises out of a convergence of many qualities, but the aesthetic and imaginative qualities must be among them. They also help to create the fascination that surrounds great leaders — the "charisma."

Intuition is sometimes equated with inspiration. There is, however, a difference. The intuitive mind works as an active agent, whereas inspiration connotes a receptive quality. According to myth, the Bible was the work of inspired minds. They were receptacles and felt themselves to be so. They would have refused to be called inventors. Nevertheless, there is a subtle kinship between intuition and inspiration. It needs a degree of intuition to discover the sources of inspiration. The dull mind is blind to them.

One serious objection could be made against the preceding emphasis on imagination and intuition as conditions of creativeness. Granting that they have guided unusual minds into new fields of knowledge, they have also led individuals and whole societies into the snares of self-deception and delusions of grandeur. People of some experience can generally distinguish the lunatic would-be savior of mankind from the true opener of new paths of wisdom. Nevertheless, false prophets have found devoted followers, especially among materially and spiritually starving fellow men. The history of religion is replete with sham apostles, and where religion lost its power, nationalist and racial fanaticisms took its place. Not only in desperate Germany but also in more fortunate countries Hitler was admired as the messenger of Aryan destiny and the source of unflinching intuition.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it would be easy for

a historian to prove how, through the course of time, exploiters have thrived on the desire of many men to flee from reason back to the womb.

What, then, is the difference between the mere vagaries of imagination and productive intuition? We have already spoken of a built-in logic in every creative act. Now we have to go on step further, the sixth one. The difference between the false and the authentic genius lies in *a special relation to reality, or a responsibility to truth*. Whereas the false prophet believes himself to be the incarnation of truth, the creative man is the devoted seeker. Whereas the former is incapable of self-correction and is therefore the propagandist of fanaticism, the latter suffers from a deep sense of incompleteness. The former represents the closed, the latter the ever open mind. He will gratefully enjoy the moment when the work he has planned is completed, whether it be a symphony finished, a mathematical problem solved, or a political action successfully performed. Without the hope and delight of certainty there would be no seeking. But it is probably only in the field of art and of mathematics that one can speak of a work that is so round and so whole and true that little or nothing can be changed. Every other human creation has in itself the germ and chance for both the better and the worse.

Seeking the truth, either by means of action or of reason, or by means of aesthetic comprehension, is an arduous exercise which most people like to avoid. But if it leads eventually to the desired result, then there emerges a sense of intimacy with kindred minds working even in different areas of thought. This is the finest delight of the educated person.

In the language of the religious mystic, man then becomes aware of his unity with the center of Being in which we all are united. He may call it "God." In secular language, he understands somewhat better the order of things and thus, being less ignorant than before, feels richer and freer. Even with the risk of persecution he cannot help but tell his fellow men what he has found. In all humility, he feels under the shadows of the great representatives of intellectual depth and progress, a Socrates, a Michael Servetus, a Giordano Bruno, a Spinoza, and all those whom mankind admires as leaders on the path of civilization.

Here we enter the seventh and last point of our discussion of creativity, namely, *involvement or commitment*. The scientist who has solved a new problem enjoys a sense of achieve-

ment, or of freedom from former uncertainty. But at the same time, his involvement deepens. He feels compelled to go on. It is the mark of the dilettante that, during intervals between his work, he can completely forget about it or drop it if it turns out to be arduous. It has not become a part of his being; it has no hold on him because he has no hold on it.

Thus, a paradox appears. The freer the creative person feels because he has overcome his former limitations, the more he becomes the servant of a perhaps ever distant goal. There develops, as it were, a lasting mutual loyalty between person and purpose. In more than twenty dialogues Plato tried to clarify the relation of man to himself, to his fellow men, and to the universe, hiding his name behind that of his master Socrates. With heroic patience, Aristotle designed the first intellectual map that oriented generation after generation on their journey toward truth. Newton went from experiment to experiment in the attempt to understand the *arcana dei* hidden in nature, and Goethe finished as an old man the *Faust* which from his youth had accompanied him throughout his life. Creative involvement could be compared to a great love with all its contradictions: won with difficulty, yet in a spirit of exaltation; sometimes lost in disappointment, yet always reconquered; a never ending concern and therefore a never ending source of self-development.

The academic professions believe too easily that the mere occupation with human subjects or with the laws of society and nature produces *per se* a more humane, lawful, and committed person. One could, of course, point to the lower rate of criminality among the educated. But that is due partly to hereditary factors; to a generally more protected upbringing; to a more sheltered life which guarantees a decent existence, even with modest income; and to a relatively high intelligence which generally helps a person see that his self-interest is best guarded when he follows the rules of decency. But in periods of stress, political and otherwise, the teaching profession has fallen disappointingly short of the ideals proclaimed in times of security. Forgotten were the great authors whose books were nicely arranged, often unread, on the bookshelves. The most uncreative attitude, cynicism, is the besetting sin of the intellectual. But the creative mind feels the ethos of his work. He wants to share with society the gift he has received from nature. He must not only be what he is; he must also give what he has.

Here is the ever increasing challenge to schools. Modern

technology demands abstract knowledge and therefore a prolonged education. Will such higher education, which up to the nineteenth century was given only to about 5 percent and is now the privilege of about 30 percent of the school population of the United States, provide merely a "neutral" or a "useful" information, or will it become an integrated and vital element in the cultural future of humanity? If we fail, the modern extension of the school age will produce the kind of disaster that always results from irresponsible sophistication and semi-intellectuality. If, on the other hand, we succeed in combining more learning with more commitment, then Eve, the mother of curiosity, and Prometheus, the bringer of fire, will not regret that they stole the arts of knowledge and industry from the domain of jealous gods.

## notes

1. On the subject of creativity, see especially Ross Money and Teker Razik, eds., *Explorations in Creativity*, New York: Harper and Row, 1967. See also Robert Ulich, "On Creativity" in Howard Mumford Jones, David Riesman and Robert Ulich, *The University and the New World*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963.
2. See E. Seillière, *Mysticisme et domination. Essais de critique impérialiste*, Paris: Bibliothèque de philosophie contemporaine, 1913.