

The Creative Process

This article explores the creative process based on self-observation. The idea was to investigate for myself the idea of the octave as a model for processes.

It seems to me that all forms of human creativity follow a similar path leading from an initial idea through to a tangible result uniting the idea with the world. Creating a work of art, writing a book, or solving a problem can all be creative and share the same characteristics: that of knowledge expressed in the world. The result of the creative process need not be great or important, but it is original and it captures a moment of knowledge. Copying or re-hashing existing forms is not creative; neither is producing attractive but empty forms.

The Process Described

1. Inspiration

The creative starts from an idea, a moment of inspiration which opens up a new field of thought, producing great enthusiasm. The possibilities seem endless, and in every direction new ideas crop up, rich with significance and affirmation. Anything seems possible and achievable; there are no problems, only solutions. This state doesn't last for long, and is followed by a questioning and consideration of the particular; out of all the possibilities, which should be made actual? Which are viable? Where to start? Sometimes this leaves us with nothing, and the moment of inspiration slips through our fingers, sometimes it leads to another idea taking us on a different track, but sometimes we are left with a certain something. Something intangible maybe, but definite; without any form and so still rich in possibilities, but giving a direction which can be referred to and developed into a form.

This "seed" proceeds from a decision on our part to take a particular direction from the unlimited possibilities we first encountered. If we take no decision there will be no result, and if we take a wrong decision then the seed will not be viable and there will be no result.

I think this corresponds to the mi-fa interval in the octave.

2. Exploration

The seed is rich with possibility but is united by a self-consistency. The different aspects unfold and expand, but always held in check by its consistency: "this belongs, this doesn't", "this fits with this", "this is how it should look or feel". As the seed develops it acquires more and more definition, and something is crystallized from it, which has the qualities of the seed developed, a basic shape or identity which tells us what it is. By exploring the seed, its possibilities and limits, we have come to a familiarity with it, a feeling for it - a sense of its essence.

3. Formation

As this process proceeds we get glimpses of the form that the result will take. We may see parts of it clearly, or have a vague impression of the whole. As the essence crystallizes, we develop a fairly definite impression of the final form, and this begins to beckon us on. Our interest moves from exploring the seed to fleshing out the form that it is to take.

There is a low point here where the impetus of the original inspiration has run down, but the attractive power of the final form is not yet very strong. We can become dispirited and lose interest, or can lose sight of the original inspiration and become entangled in forms for their own sake.

As the form continues to develop it is balanced and refined in accordance with the essence. It is too late to alter the form radically at this point if it doesn't reflect the inspiration; the form can only follow the essence, which has to be correct.

4. Realization

There comes a point where the form has been defined (at least, in the mind's eye) but the final result has not yet been completed. The result may be close to completion with only finishing touches required, or it may be further from completion, but to the creator the form is exactly defined. At this point all of the impetus in the process has run down. The original motive power of the inspiration was replaced by the attractive power of the final form, but that too is now ended, and the final result is still incomplete. The motivation for the final step can only arise from outside the process, if there is some need for the final result. For example motivation could result from the need to base something else on the completed result, or to use it to communicate the idea to others. To ourselves, the final result is no better in itself than the complete form; it is only worth realizing if it has a use.

I think this corresponds to the si-do interval in the octave.

An Example

It isn't easy to convey the process precisely, so here is a particular example which may help to tie it down a little. I was thinking about writing some programs for my home computer. I wanted to develop something which would make the computer easier to use. After a while an idea for a particular kind of program struck me, and immediately I became very enthusiastic about it, and started looking at how the program would operate, and what it could do. When I got down to figuring out how to write the program, I realized that it was far too complicated for me, and so I didn't take it any further. I carried on thinking about it and eventually came up with an idea which was like my original idea, but on a smaller scale, so that I thought I could carry it out.

I then began to design the program and write parts of it, fitting them all together. As this went on I reached a point where I had a lot of the program written, but still had quite a bit to go, and I lost interest for a few days. I just couldn't be bothered to continue. After a while I did begin work again, and with mounting enthusiasm, got it to the point where the program mostly worked, by filling in gaps and correcting errors. At this point I was quite satisfied. The program worked most of the time, and I'd done all the interesting part of the development, all that was left was tracking down some problems and correcting them. It was some days until I took this final step, motivated because I wanted to use the program for doing some other development work.

The Effects of Creativity

Art is a form of communication, and we can use this to get another view of the creative process. Language and communication depend on a shared system of symbols and experience. For example the word 'table' signifies to us all a certain class of physical objects with certain properties. But to describe a particular table to you would take a lot of words or a picture to convey the image I hold in my head. If I use words then you can build up the image yourself if I am sufficiently skilled in description and you in imagination, but it is still likely to be a slightly different image. The image is not the same as the description, which is a series of pointers to the image. It takes work to produce a good description, and it takes work to envisage the image from a description.

What about something which isn't an image, but a feeling for something - a sense of some identity such as might arise while watching the stars at night, or a beautiful scene, or sharing a moment of understanding with someone? Can we describe this kind of thing in words? It is much more difficult than conveying an image, not only because we lack shared experience (we can't say it was like that feeling you had yesterday), but because it is harder for ourselves to come to grips with this kind of experience. We find it difficult to fully remember a feeling in the same way that we can remember an image; we find it harder to interpret to ourselves.

Sometimes we see this with dreams, where we wake up from a strong dream with a sense of its significance or meaning which we can't pin down but which may be familiar from past experiences. As we wake up the feeling fades and we are left with the images from the dream, which of course are not the same as the feeling itself. One of the attractions of art is that it can point to these kinds of feelings in the same way that a description can point to an image.

What about something which isn't even a feeling, but more like a moment of knowledge or inspiration? Something we may experience as communion with something greater than ourselves, or as an absence of anything tangible, or as a field of light? These are all words for something beyond words, even less tangible than feelings. This sometimes arises when we are quiet, maybe in meditation practice, and then seems familiar to us, and in that moment our normal life seems irrelevant.

How is it that we can experience these different things, have something in us which knows these things, and yet be unable to come to grips with them? We have the faculties for experience at these different levels, but they are undernourished and unorganized. In the same way that in our childhood we learnt language and our image of the world, we can become familiar with these levels. This is an important aspect of the creative process: as the creator works to develop understanding and organization of the different levels, so the creative process takes place. To the creator, the object finally resulting from the process is of secondary importance compared to the understanding the creator gains. The object is also of secondary importance to the person on the receiving end of the communication: it is our own effort and growth that enables us to see what it points to. This is why we can get more out of a good painting or book each time we go back to it, As we grow we can see more and more of what the object is pointing to in us. It is not the object that makes us understand, but our own efforts.

Some Aspects of the Process

1. Reaching the Creative

Our starting point for looking at the creative process was the initial idea or inspiration, but this rarely comes to us unbidden. It would be unusual to come up with an idea for a cheap energy source without having thought about the subject beforehand. Ideas arise in response to an irritant – a question, problem or need which is important to us, and which we put effort into trying to resolve. Before we can open up to the creative level we have to come to the realisation that we don't know all the answers, and yet maintain a desire to know. In this way we become receptive to new ideas. If we are busy playing around with different forms then we won't be aware of any ideas arising, particularly if the idea is not obviously related to what we are doing. This is why we often get new ideas when we've taken a break from trying to solve a problem. Our efforts have defined the essence of the problem so that it can be handled at other levels than that of forms, and we have become open to any ideas which arise.

When an idea does arise, it can seem to be the absolute answer, even when it is only a partial illumination. Even a fragment of knowledge has great power and worth, but it is the nature of the universe that there is always something more. The universe is infinite and can never be fathomed. There is no 'absolute truth' that we can reach; we can only approach it more closely. Accepting a particular idea as 'the answer' cuts off further knowledge. This is not to say that particular ideas are worthless, but if we take them as the final word then we accept silver for gold. Silver is fine, but it isn't gold.

Another difficulty with the creative is criticism. We can take against an idea because it doesn't fit in with our own views. Maybe the idea seems superficially to be wrong or unworkable, but one of the functions of the new is to overturn the old. The greatest and most strongly resisted scientific discoveries were the ones that broke through an old world-view to create a new one.

2. First Gap (mi-fa)

The first phase of the creative process ends with the formation of a seed, something particular taken from the field opened by the original inspiration. This seed is the fruit of possibilities investigated, and is formed by a decision to take a particular direction. This decision is important since the seed determines the direction of the rest of the process. The level of possibilities doesn't stop working once the seed is formed, but it becomes limited because we are no longer open to any possibilities, but we are centred on the seed. The seed is a blend of possibility and coherence, possibility supplying the impetus for the process to continue, and coherence enabling the seed to take on a form. This mix of possibility and coherence must be correct if the process is to complete. When we take the decision that forms the seed, we can easily lose direction. We may particularly want to answer one question, but an idea for something else arises and we find ourselves following that instead of the original aim. This is one of the ways our intentions go awry.

3. Low Point (sol-la)

The low point in the process occurs as the impetus of the seed gives way to the attractive power of the form. It is possible that the process will run out of energy when this happens, but just a little perseverance will take it over the hump to the downhill side. This point is like

the time when everything is in the middle of the floor, during a big cleaning session. It takes an effort to begin putting everything back in place. Another possible problem at this stage is becoming entangled in forms and losing sight of the original aim. As we start dealing with forms it is very easy to cut out the higher levels and shape the form according to its inherent tendencies rather than the essence we are aiming at. This occurs often in writing, when an analogy can run away, changing from a useful tool of meaning into a pleasing image without meaning. For the creative to work each level needs to serve the higher levels, not themselves. In a practical sense, this means that we must keep returning to our aim, remembering what it is we are doing.

To look at the process as a progression through a series of levels can be misleading. All the levels work all the time, and if we ignore the higher levels when working at the lower, then there is nothing to judge the creation against, and we will end up with something not expressing the original inspiration, but of an accidental nature.

4. Second Gap (si-do)

When the final form has been created this does not mean that the process is complete, although it may feel that way. The point is reached where we are satisfied with the form, and in our mind's eye the thing is complete, even if the physical form still needs work. For instance, the story has been written, but still needs to be typed, polished and published. We always underestimate the effort required for the final step. It can seem quite trivial compared to the rest of the process, a mere formality, but it is in fact a critical step. Something that we have developed as part of ourselves now has to stand alone in the world, something fluid is going to be fixed for ever. This step can show up flaws in the form, for although we have an almost endless capacity for fooling ourselves about the form, but the world is more clear sighted!

Finding the motivation to take this final step is difficult because as far as we are concerned, the work has been done when the final form is completed. We have no desire to take it further, and the motivation has to come from outside, rooted in some need for the final result of the process.

5. An Analogy

The conception and birth of a child has interesting parallels with the process described. We can look at the moment of conception when the sperm and egg fuse to create the embryo as an analogue to the formation of the seed in the creative process. The moment of birth would tie in with the final step of the process, and the formation of essence might correspond to the time when the embryo becomes sufficiently organized to begin maintaining itself, perhaps when its heart begins to beat.

6. Standing back

Taken as an abstract process, there are many ways of seeing the creative. In one way it is a transformation of energy through different levels from the most abstract to the physical, a process which occurs by means of ourselves, using our faculties to accomplish the transformations. It is also a blending of the higher and lower, because as the energy is transformed to the actual, the creator becomes organized on higher levels, developing greater understanding and familiarity with each level. The process has focal points: the seed,

essence and final form, actualized things which are separated by levels of flux where two opposing functions maintain the connection and allow interaction. The process works in four worlds, actualizing three centres through six functions, blending the higher with the lower.

The creative process is one example of a more general 'law' of how things happen. The critical points and the ebb and flow of energy occur in many things in a similar way, based upon blending according to the law of three. This law has been represented in many ways throughout history, such as the tree of life of the Kabbalists, and the octave of Gurdjieff, each showing it in a different way and emphasizing different aspects, just as I have attempted here. But as always, real understanding can only come from you.

7. Final Word

It is via the creative that things change. Instead of 'more of the same' the process can change the creator and change the world. The creative touches everything in you, using all the levels within you, and to pass it by is to do less than you can. If function defines purpose then maybe the creative is our purpose in the universe.

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