



### ***Creativity: A Crisis in Our Time***

As Rotary grows, expands to fill the world, giving service and hopefully solving some of the world's problems in extending a helping hand, we sometimes move outside our community and miss the crisis at home.

The Pew Research Center reports that: "Daily text messaging among American teens has shot up, from 38% of teens texting daily in February of 2008 to 54% of teens texting daily in September 2009. Half of teens send 50 or more text messages a day, or 1500 texts a month, and one in three send more than 100 texts a day, or more than 3000 texts a month. Older teen girls 14-17 lead the charge on text messaging.' In an article, The Edutopia Poll by Sara Ring, she writes: "'IYO txtng = NME or NBD?" Translation: "In your opinion, is text messaging the enemy, or no big deal?" As more and more students immerse themselves in Textspeak over their cell phones and computers, educators worry that their writing skills are suffering. After all, the short-message format routinely

sacrifices grammar, syntax, and punctuation for the sake of slang and brevity. There is concern that students who frequently express themselves in abbreviations and smiley faces may lose the capacity for more nuanced, grammatically correct writing. Is the prevalence of text messaging something to worry about? WDYT?"

The crisis is not, some educators think, the decline of spoken and written English but the decline in seeing the world around young people and carrying this into adulthood. Also the crisis is the community around the very young is a road to conformity, not innovation and creative thought. Without the observation of the world, creativity will suffer. Fifty-four percent of teens today, in America, text while only twelve percent communicate face to face. One must find a way to interact with the world or the process that we call "creativity" will suffer and, especially in America, without creativity no nation can compete and grow in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

***The happiest people don't necessarily have the best of everything; they just make the best of everything they have.***

**'Life isn't about how to survive the storm, but how to dance in the rain..**

*Although children play and can dance in the rain at times, they sometime have been corrupted by the world and have lost the essence of pure play, the ability to dance in the rain. This may, though, just be a process where it takes time for the inner child of the adult to be rewarded for showing his true face, his true nature. And the artist just may be famous (but not to a child), although what he or she offers the child may have lasting value. Some artists never lose the inner core of creativity. Pablo Picasso was one such human being.*

**The Dove of Peace by Picasso.**



When Pablo Picasso presented an ornate, cut-out doll to the four-year-old daughter of his close friends as a birthday gift, the girl promptly burst into tears because she had wanted a doll she had seen in a toy shop, not a creation from the Spanish artist's own hand. Lucia, the daughter of the Italian model and actress, Lucia Bose, and the star matador, Luis Miguel Dominguin, could never have known Picasso's gifts of drawings, cut-outs and prints which he created for her and her two siblings, would come to be the family's most remarkable possessions. The 40 artworks, many of which were inspired by the three children, their parents and Spanish nanny, have since been credited with shedding a unique light on the artist's playful side as well as his love of children. The collection, which features images of four-eared bulls, children dressed as matadors and brightly painted ceramics, had been in the family's possession for decades and had never before been seen in Britain. It was sold at Christie's on 25 June, 2008, in London, and was estimated to be worth £500,000 but sold for more..

But if Picasso is an exception to losing the childhood joy of creativity, this crisis is becoming a problem for the majority of people. In Rotary, we have been losing membership and it needs creative solutions. On an international scale, this crisis has had small notice as some nations emphasize creative thinking in their educational system. It is recorded by exconomists that nations that lose the creative edge lose the future (that is 'a future' based upon the present). All we need to see is our state of our world today: America has an unemployment rate of 9 percent—and somewhere north of 16 percent if you count the folks who have given up the job search altogether. And there seems to be no end in sight: last week, the US Labor Department reported that first-time claims for unemployment benefits pushed past 500,000, up 12,000 from the previous week. Millions of American, particularly retirees on fixed incomes, have seen their savings dwindle as the rate of return on their savings is now a pittance. And while this is

happening to the adult population, children in America are not getting classes in creative thinking, as the art programs are cut from the curriculum of the schools.

Torsten Knauerhase, an elementary school teacher and a teacher-consultant for the West Texas Writing Project, argues for providing students with the tools and opportunities to be creative and imaginative. “Unfortunately, the concern about the rising numbers of students who fail their mandated tests, that supposedly measure their skills in math and science, has led to the demise or even elimination of the arts in our educational system.”

As one writer commented recently: “A culture who can not articulate its path, which is what Art does, is a culture with no value and no future.”

**Here are two other voices about the importance of imagination and creativity: “ Since it doesn't cost a dime to dream, you'll never shortchange yourself when you stretch your imagination. -- Robert Schuller**

**A man to carry on a successful business must have imagination. He must see things in a vision, a dream of the whole thing... -- Charles M. Schwab**

But today there is a greater problem (a problem that seems to stem from the fact that each culture in which minds are formed are conforming more than creating), as stated in [www.CreativeMinds.org](http://www.CreativeMinds.org):

**Age and creativity:** A popular perception is that creativity and old age do not mix. Creativity is the domain of the young -- and to certain extent this is true, yet not in the way that many of us would expect.

**The youthful decline:** Our decline in creativity does not start when we are 40 or 50. It starts around about the the age when we enter school.

**The alarming decline: At around about the age of five, we are using about 80% of our creative potential. We invent daily - no matter than our inventions have been invented before, the fact is that we are innovating at a remarkable rate. The scary coda to this story is that by the age of twelve, our creative output has declined to about 2% of our potential, and it generally stays there for the rest of our lives.**

**The price of acceptance:** And then we start to learn the price of living in the modern world - which is conformity. To live with other people, you must follow their rules and values, which seem to be more about what you *cannot* do than what you can do. We are straight-jacketed and smart-stepped into doing what others do and not reinventing our worlds every day. When someone is being creative, they are also rather unpredictable, which can make living with them an uncertain and perhaps threatening experience. So we are taught to be polite and be nice to people, including not scaring them with our creative thoughts.

**Scholastic thinking:** Schools, also and especially, drill conformity into us. We learn that there is one true way of thinking. We learn that there is one right answer for every problem, and that this is the one in the teacher's head. Success is based on knowing what is wanted, not what is interesting. We are told to 'Read The Question' in essays and examinations. Marks are awarded for nice writing and regurgitation, not for creative and lateral thinking.

Universities are often worse than high-schools which are worse than junior schools. At University, we learn to reference every assertion and never, never to question the wisdom and ultimate knowledge of our professors.

By the time we leave full-time education, we are functional members of society, but our creative potential has been very largely stifled. The good and great have commented on this in the [quotations on education](#). There is even a whole school of philosophy (Conventionalism) that describes how new knowledge is constrained.

A caveat: Academic knowledge is not bad. In fact much of it is very interesting and can be used in many ways. It is just that when all you learn is to *know* and to repeat knowledge, then there is little creativity going on.

**The traps** As adults, we do become less creative, but not in the traditional way. Our continued creative decline is more due to falling into a number of cognitive traps than the fading of old age.**of adulthood:**

### **Habitual ossification**

Where creativity does fade away is when we do not use it. 'Use it or lose it', as they say. One of the biggest culprits here is the simple pattern of human habit. Once we start doing something one way, we get comfortable with it and then do not change or vary it. We find the best route home and then we always drive that way, even if it is choked with traffic.

We also get stuck in clichés and familiar conversations. Few of us read much ('Too busy!'), fewer of us continue to study and fewer still innovate for the fun of it.

### **The expert trap**

Those of us who do study and become experts can easily fall into the expert trap, where experts can spend more time defending their hill than building it further. [Here are some quotes](#) by experts who should have known better, but were too busy being expert. And [here are more quotes](#) about what experts should really do.

We repeat this in our roles in organizations. When you are a manager, you find you have the rapt attention of everyone below you, and it is very easy to assume that they are in thrall of your intelligence and wisdom. The trap here is to assume that you are all-knowing and to pronounce with great certainty on all and sundry. It is also a trap to feel obliged to the

expectations of knowledge that others put upon you and feel unable to say 'I don't know, let's give it a try'. Managers must manage, as they say.

And the cycle repeats at home, where parents take a similar role, being the fount of all knowledge for their children, who learn that being an adult means being certain and certainly not being creative.

### **Unintelligent closure**

Intelligence is, to some extent related to creativity, and brighter people generally are able to be more creative. Although a funny thing happens at around an IQ figure of 120, as described in Edward de Bono's book, *Serious Creativity*. Above this level, creativity seems to drop off. This is quite probably due to these people falling into the expert trap.

Another reason is the premature closure of quick thinking, where bright people 'get it' in seconds flat and hence stop any further divergent thinking. Guy Claxton, in his book *Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind*, tells of the benefits of slower and more exploratory thinking.

### **Staying creative**

The secret of life is staying creative. Keep your creative juices flowing and you will stay ahead of the pack.

### **Do different things**

The best way of staving off creative ossification is to keep doing different things. Read different books and papers. Go to different places for your holidays. Talk to different people. Listen to them and seek to synergize and synthesize. Take every opportunity to regenerate your generative powers.

### **The not-so geriatric effect**

But what about the effects of aging. We are born with a fixed number of brain cells and they increasingly die off\* after the age of 50, and even faster beyond 70.

This may be true, but, barring mental illness, the effect is miniscule in comparison with the habitual ossification effect. People who have stayed creative through their lives are way above others, not only people on the final lap but also those much younger than them. With practice, you can get *better* at creativity, which puts a creatively active 60 year old streets ahead of a stultified 30 year old.

Creativity even affects longevity. It has been proven that people who stay mentally active live longer even than those who stay physically active. If you go to the mental gym every day, then your alertness will keep you going longer.

### **\*A coda**

Nelles Hamilton has kindly informed me that: "The latest from molecular biologists is that brain cells and neural pathways are created daily at a pace that results in what essentially is an entirely new brain structure every few months. For that matter, our bodies—even our bones—are similarly rebuilt, molecule by molecule, every couple of years, and, in the case of our stomach linings, every couple of days."

A scary effect! Regeneration raises questions about how memories and capabilities are sustained, although I suspect that the 'use it or lose it' principle is still true.

Rotarians have seen this and used imagination/creativity to solve problems within a community. At the Montreal RI Annual Convention, all those attending were rewarded to hear writer Greg Mortenson speak of his creative ways to help a foreign culture (which were chronicled in his books: Three Cups of Tea and Stones into Schools). A wonderful creative effort was show in the Rotary Video Magazine, volume 5, issue 2 (<http://www.rotary.org/en/MediaAndNews/multimedia/RVMVideoMagazine/Pages/InArtWeUnite>) where, through a Rotary Foundation Matching Grant, Rotarians supported the Bitone Children's Center. (Running time: 16.25)

The crisis now is to take lessons learned in the world and bring them home. As many of the leader of this world have said: "Creative thinking in the only way to make progress in a changing world."

**Without leaps of imagination, or dreaming, we lose the excitement of possibilities. Dreaming, after all, is a form of planning. -- Gloria Steinem**

**Commitment unlocks the doors of imagination, allows vision, and gives us the right stuff to turn our dreams into reality. -- James Womack**

Rotary has, from its beginning in 1905, been an organization of creative, imaginative workers that when one door is closed to accomplish something important, they find another door, enter and serve. Creativity will not die in our world (true) but it could be lessened if concerned individuals do not step forward. In the inner city schools of America, only 25-37 percent of our students graduate. That five year old of today who is using 80% of creative capacity of the mind (when he or she does not get support for his or her creativity) may be the adult of tomorrow who used only 2% of the creative mind (a mind that must solve the unknown problems tomorrow).

