



# creative The

*The sound of galloping hooves. A brief thunder as the horse draws abreast, a swoosh of wind as rider and mount sweep past. Knight, cowboy, outlaw, courier...? Whoever it was, they are now plunging along this path in the forest toward the spot on the horizon where trees and path converge – the vanishing point. The faster the journey, the sooner the destination is reached...*

*Occasionally, a smaller trail branches from the main one and disappears into the foliage. A sound may be heard in passing – perhaps a bird call, a breaking branch, or something less distinct, intriguing by its lack of definition. A momentary break in the rhythm of the gallop.... But time is of the essence – the rider, with consummate focus, spurs on toward the goal. Everything depends on it.*

By Ed Bamiling

**This is the basic** narrative of a story related some years ago by George Kokis, a ceramics professor at the University of Oregon, in a workshop dealing with the creative process. (I hope he will forgive my paraphrasing.) It's a simple, evocative, perhaps somewhat romantic image of two beings united in common intent – to reach a goal, whatever it may be, as quickly and efficiently as possible. A delivery? A rescue mission? A crucial rendezvous? A deadline of some kind is implicit...

Whose goal is it? What is the desired outcome? In thinking about creative process, it is the journey itself which is critical. Sometimes, metaphorically, one must rein in the horse and take time to explore that smaller trail or find out what that sound actually was. It may be exactly that bit of information which is essential to successfully reaching the destination.

***"When I have arranged a bouquet for the purpose of painting it, I always turn it to the side I did not plan."***

Pierre Auguste Renoir – Impressionist painter

In the age of technology and rapid change,

individuals and companies are under constant pressure to produce, keep ahead of the competition, be innovative. Such an environment demands flexibility, the ability to regard both the immediate situation and the larger picture from multiple perspectives. How do we manage this? How do we become adept at walking on ever-shifting terrain?

***"Creative thinking may mean simply the realization that there is no particular virtue in doing things the way they have always been done."***

Rudolf Flesch – Philosopher

Some months ago I took part in a five-day experiential program focusing on creative leadership. The primary thrust was to find ways to more readily access R-Mode (referring to right-brain, as opposed to L-Mode, or left-brain, thinking) – that often under-utilized part of ourselves which is more to do with intuitive, non-linear abilities than the more rational, logical side. Activities included drawing, collage, music interpretation and composition, playing musical instruments, creative writing, dream work, haiku, etc. I have been exposed to a number of these activities by virtue of working at The Banff Centre and I have used some of them in different aspects of my work, but it was very interesting to see them employed in this type of organizational setting.

All of the other participants, from companies across the US, came from non-artistic backgrounds and they approached the course with a mixture of curiosity, excitement, trepidation – and some skepticism. For many, this was completely outside their comfort zone. But they had all chosen this program because they wanted to be challenged in new directions, to discover ways to access their creative talents, and to learn how to use them in both their personal and professional lives.

# creative journey

Certain exercises were more compelling for some people, less so for others. No surprise there – thankfully, we are all different beings, with varying tastes. A few discovered a previously hidden flair or interest in creative writing. Others found skills in communicating through visual imagery that they had been unaware of. All participants became more relaxed by the end of the week, more confident about their creative (not necessarily artistic) capacities, and more comfortable with expressing themselves, with trusting and articulating personal thoughts and insights. Verbal and visual imagery was richer and more fluid. People were more willing to be open, to take risks with themselves and with each other. Doors had opened, at least to some extent, to new creative voices. And, most importantly, there was a lot of fun.

Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of this process was the evolution of the group from a collection of random individuals to a generous, enjoyable and creatively functioning community in a very short time. Participants were excited about returning to their workplaces with creative toolboxes in hand and ideas flowing for ways to re-vitalize their personal work environment.

**"But that was a course, where everyone was there for that reason. How do you make that happen in your workplace?"**

**Good question.** How do we foster an intentional environment, where creative voices have room to speak? Why do we want to? And, how do we make it safe?

## Why?

The benefits of cultivating the collective creative energy and talent of an organizational workforce would seem to be largely self-evident, but we can always be reminded of some of them:

- to have a strong, progressive, fluid organization which embraces change
- to build a greater bank of innovative ideas
- to have more engaged, more confident staff members

- for employees to gain more enjoyment of work and a greater level of personal satisfaction
- to see colleagues with a broader perspective and understanding
- to have better interaction and communication between staff members
- to obtain greater "buy-in" of organizational goals and practices
- to create an atmosphere of generosity and mutual support rather than one of territorialism

How do we build such an environment? – some things to consider:

## Give permission.

This is crucial. People are often hampered in expressing themselves creatively by a real or perceived lack of permission in their organization. The climate must be genuine – and must encourage experimentation, as well as accept the possibility of failure.

## Make time and space.

As with any activity, practice is required for a skill to develop and evolve. The more frequently a "space" is made for creative thinking and action, the easier it becomes. This space is physical, psychological, and emotional – all contribute to the climate of "safety," which is essential if people are to truly engage in new thinking and new processes.

## Create a structure.

This may seem contradictory to the notion that creativity just happens spontaneously or that it is somehow only the domain of particularly gifted individuals, but a contextual framework of some kind will help ideas flow more easily. (I am reminded of high school English classes – creative writing assignments were usually easier if there was a particular subject to tackle than "write about whatever you want.")

## Be open.

There are no wrong answers, only different ones. It's more important for people to feel they can express themselves freely than to find the "right" response. The more ideas volunteered, the more likely that a certain percentage of them will be useful for the situation at hand. Others may be valuable for future reference or other applications.

*"We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."*

Albert Einstein

## Challenge expectations.

Create the opportunity to break routines and change ingrained behaviours.

What if...

- regular team/staff meetings sometimes took place at different times and locations – outside, over lunch, on the roof, at breakfast, in the park, at an art gallery?
- people took turns chairing, preparing the agenda?
- once a month, a guest (artist, performer, scientist, psychologist, athlete, etc.) was invited to address or interact with your group?
- work groups were composed of people from different areas and levels of the organization?
- employees were actively encouraged to come up with their own "what ifs"?

A creative organization is a learning organization, one in which there is a continuous, receptive forum for new ideas, new skills development, and new perspectives. It is also a human(e) organization, which recognizes the importance of, and fosters the development of, positive dynamic relationships among the people who belong to it. In the competitive world we now inhabit, this is not only advisable – it is critical.