

## CHAPTER 3

by Christopher Clouder

# THE THREADS OF CREATIVITY

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## SUMMARY

In human history we have always been creative and this capacity has had a determinative influence on how we lead our lives. However, what really changes over time is how we think about this capacity for creativity and how we make it conscious. Our lives increasingly require the ability to deal with conflicting messages, to make judgments in the absence of rules, to cope with ambiguity, and to frame imaginative solutions to the problems we face. We speak about “disruptive technology” when contemplating the changes wrought upon our lives in the last few years, but in the longer term the real disruptive technologies are actually the arts. Human creativity is a complex continuum of activity, relationships and inner change. There is no creativity without movement.

## THE THREADS OF CREATIVITY

*‘It is music and dancing that makes me at peace with the world, and at peace with myself.’<sup>1</sup> (Nelson Mandela)*

Every day and every moment of our waking lives we live with the creativity of the past. It surrounds and envelops us in all that we do whether it is a cultivated garden or park, the architecture in which we live or work, the clothes we wear, the food we cook, the furniture we use, the social and economic expectations we have or the language we speak. Most of the time we do not perceive it – it is just what it is, but we can also focus our minds on it and then a stream of new questions arises. When we ask ourselves what effect does this space have on me, and why? Why do I use this particular word to describe something I feel? Why do I prefer this picture for my wall? Why are some actions acceptable in one culture but are not considered proper in another? These questions are creative in themselves. They take us into new realms. In human history there has always been creativity and this capacity has had a determinative influence on how we lead our lives, but what really changes over time is how we think about this capacity for creativity and make it conscious.

The contemporary vibrant discussion on the value of creativity and innovation and their connection to our emotional life is not new. However, it is different. Utilising the powers of fire, developing the linguistic skills to communicate, creating the first wheel or clay pot, the discovery of metallurgy, building houses for habitation leading to larger and larger communities, finding ways of coordinating social endeavours and aspirations, have all deeply affected human evolution. The inventions and innovations of today should be measured against the discoveries of the past with certain humility. It is all too easy to have hubris about our present state compared to the achievements of our ancestors. Creativity, from the invention of knitting needles to the manufacture of iPads, is synonymous with our continuously evolving sense of identity. *“... never before has the pace of innovation accelerated so dramatically, filling our lives with new fashions, new electronics, new cars, new music, new architecture ... And even now a new crop of artists gaze at the Mona Lisa with an eye to turning it into something fresh and dazzlingly creative. The human chain of invention remains unbroken and in our superbly connected world, our singular talent to create races ahead of us.”<sup>2</sup> (Pringle, H. 2013)* In this age of

frenzied newness we also need an anchor lest the 'race' exhausts us and the 'unbroken chain' is snapped. To find our bearings we need more than ever the salutary thought that someone, somewhere, somehow created this, and what they created becomes, as it were, 'spellbound' in time and material. Then we can create the connectedness between the past and the present that we need. *'... our lives increasingly require the ability to deal with conflicting messages, to make judgments in the absence of rule, to cope with ambiguity, and to frame imaginative solutions to problems we face.'*<sup>3</sup> (Eisner. 2002)

The question of "how" something is created or invented is usually answerable in some form, at least in terms of what has been created since the Renaissance, which was a time when art became self-conscious and a more alert attention began to be paid to an individual's innovative attainments. Those who embarked on a creative career at that time became celebrated for their work, hence overturning St. Augustine's authoritative and stern edict *"Creature non potest creare"* (a creature should not presume to create). In contrast, Alberti in 15<sup>th</sup> century Florence likened the painter's work to that of *'another God'*<sup>4</sup> (*On Painting*. 1435). A battle was begun for the human soul and in many ways the battleground is the same now as it was then. This was the starting point of the early modern age in European history of which we are the heirs. We speak about "disruptive technology" when contemplating the changes wrought upon our lives in the last few years but in the longer term the real disruptive technologies are the arts. They cause us to see and experience the world and our fellow human beings differently, and our ways of perception fluctuate with the influence of our times, our changing cultural and natural environment and our sense of selfhood.

The Ancient Greeks well knew with their theatrical concept of *'catharsis'*, whereby immersing ourselves in the art of the theatre and the tragic god-given destiny of mythological characters, we are able to find new depths and strengths in ourselves to face the challenges within our individual biographies. They celebrated creativity in their exuberant poetic hymns to Pallas Athene, who combined the interconnected capacity of the hands to produce craftwork and that of the mind that lead to clarity of thought. Human creativity is actually a complex continuum of activity, relationships and inner change. It meanders, flows, doubles back on itself, offers up contradictions, requires nurturing and concentration, appears as if from nowhere and weaves itself into the fabric of our lives. In being imaginative we can create our own maze and like following Ariadne's thread we can find an innovative way of emerging from it and find ourselves in a new place. The most influential narrative of creativity is the *Odyssey*, albeit nearly 3000 years old. As well as depicting the inner and outer voyages of its eponymous *'nimble-witted'* hero in his decades' long quest to return home, it contains telling images of how we create our world. Penelope, in her determined attempt to reject suitors who claim her husband must have died over his twenty year absence, has promised that she will choose one of them on completion of her weaving, But what she weaves by day she unweaves by night. This 'unweaving' is as creative as the weaving, creativity involves not just the making but the unmaking too. When we try to capture such a pathway it runs through our fingers like sand. It is a process that takes up threads of thought, the weft of structure, the choice of colour and tone, the dynamism of movement and the liberation of the spirit. By relying on only

analytically narrowing things down we might end up destroying the very thing we wish to flourish. This is the dichotomy we face in discussing creativity. We instinctively like fixed points that can be calibrated and measured because they give a sense of understanding and control over what is around us, but we also have to face the mercurial ever-evolving nature within us.

*'A lead pencil has a point, an argument may have a point. Remarks may be pointed and a man who wants to borrow five pounds comes to a point ..... Lots of things have points: especially weapons. But where is the point of life? Where is the point of love? Where, if it comes to the point, is the point of a bunch of violets? There is no point. Life and love are life and love, a bunch of violets is a bunch of violets, and to drag in the idea of a point is to ruin everything. Live and let live, love and let love, flower and fade, and follow the natural curve, which flows on, pointless.... Life is not a question of points, but a question of flow'*<sup>5</sup> (D.H. Lawrence. 1929)

All artists speculate on where their art springs from, even if they keep such thoughts to themselves. Others are more open. Paul Klee famously *'took a line for a walk'*<sup>6</sup> (Paul Klee.1920) and declared *"Art is a simile of Creation"* (Ibid). He maintained that if the point is the centre then the line is the first dynamic and creative act. In these Creative Confessions he also stated that *'Art does not reproduce the visible, rather it makes visible.'* (Ibid) It is like a fire: *'A certain fire, an impulse to create, is kindled, is transmitted through the hand, leaps to the canvas and in the form of a spark leaps back to its starting place, completing the circle – back to the eye (back to the source of the movement, the will, the idea)'*. Works of art *'help you ... to fancy you are God.'* (Ibid) He also perspicuously perceived that *'Movement is the source of all change ... Character, too, is movement.'* (Ibid) There is no creativity without movement. And how we move inwardly and outwardly are intimately connected. The artistic artefacts we produce are the result of *'techne'*, that is our art or skill, but we are guided either consciously or subconsciously by what is happening within us. Motion is the source of all creation. Klee is connecting what is physically created with the stream of emotions we all contain. For him lines have a social context because they show our encounters in either converging or diverging forms and therefore they have an emotional quality. And it is the challenge of elucidating this connection that we have set ourselves in this publication. We have taken the arts as our starting point and then followed the flow through the emotions to the source of our creativity.

Questions about creativity of an earlier provenance than the Renaissance, such as why the pyramids were built or Stonehenge erected, lead us to imaginative conjecture and rival theories but never a definitive answer. The questions themselves give us space for creativity in thinking. But the question of 'why' always leads us into new territory and helps us find the dormant creativity in ourselves. Then we encounter the dual aspect of all art, that what had seemed familiar can also seem strange. Art lives in a context but can simultaneously elevate that context into something new and challenging. *'Certain aspects are moving precisely because they return us with greater clarity to an aspect of ourselves which we seem to have forgotten or even betrayed.'*<sup>7</sup> (Armstrong. J. 2000) Creativity can be a voyage into the unknown but also into the world of memory and forgetting. Written at a time of great drama and foreboding

T.S.Eliot summarizes this process concisely, depicting a unifying current between past, present and future:

*'We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time'*<sup>8</sup>  
(T.S.Eliot. Little Gidding. 1942)

So does creativity make us better people? The Second World War brought this question into stark relief with the concept of the *"banality of evil"*<sup>9</sup>. (Ahrendt.1963) In Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot novels the eponymous hero has to tackle malfeasance of the most creative kind that takes great imagination and rival creativity to unravel. In real life creative tax avoidance, creative bank robbers and creative criminals of a far worse nature, even leading to genocide, have been part of our social fabric in spite of our creative efforts to rein in their malign influence. How do these creative acts differ from the creativity we wish to celebrate and develop here? This added dimension, that can distinguish one sort of creativity from another, is not to be found in statistical evidence or in a mound of academic papers, but lies in the practice and capacity for generosity of spirit, as Mandela has so recently demonstrated. When we practice the arts we also create the opportunity to open ourselves up, but whether we take this opportunity is another matter. We can however acknowledge the multi-dimensional aspects of our psyche and through that gain greater insight into the value of collaboration and the value of human dignity. Bishop Tutu has summarised what the concept of 'ubuntu' meant to Mandela. This was a guiding principle in his political life: *'It refers to gentleness, to compassion, to hospitality, to openness to others, to vulnerability, to be available to others, and to know that you are bound up with them in the bundle of life.'*<sup>10</sup> (1986)

There is as well a fundamental connection between art and playfulness. Nabokov saw art as *'divine play'* and asserted that Homo Poeticus preceded Homo Sapiens. In play we cannot fail. Our imagination changes our daily world and its usual limitations are disbanded. We can be confident in the exploration of our emotions. We can imagine becoming what we could be. Our ingenuity is not tempered by the conventional. Our sub-consciousness can be liberated and get on in its own productive way. In biblical terms *'I was by God's side, a little child, delighting God day after day, ever at play by God's presence, at play everywhere in God's world, delighting to be with the human race.'*<sup>11</sup> (Proverbs of Solomon) For Plato, too, seriousness and playfulness were not opposites but closely related *'A man should spend his life at 'play'... sacrificing, singing, dancing – so that he can win the favour of the gods.'*<sup>12</sup> (Plato. Circa 350 B.C.)

In 2014 we are commemorating 100 years since the outbreak of the First World War and its antecedents showed little generosity of spirit. This war was the product of individual choices made by men in power. *"It was Europe's and the world's tragedy in retrospect that none of the key players in 1914 were great or imaginative leaders who had the courage to stand out against the pressure building up for war."*<sup>13</sup> (McMillan 2013) This analysis highlights the fact that

the lack of imagination enabled humanity to sleepwalk into disaster and that to be truly creative requires courage. In 1918 the Austrian writer Karl Kraus, gazing across the devastation of the preceding four years, coined the word “*gegenschöpferisch*” – which means counter-creative. It was as though God looked at our antics and ‘*saw it was not good*’. When we are being creative we can never be sure of the outcome and so our ethical stance comes into play. Clearly If we are to search for new thoughts we must be prepared to take risks. In Michelangelo’s Sistine chapel fresco of the creation, Adam, reclining listlessly on the Earth, lifts up his limp hand to receive divine energy sweeping down from the heavens. Then as we follow the sequence of frescoes across the ceiling it leads to that moment when our creativity leads beyond what were hitherto ‘commandments’. We become free. But we could also end up disgraced and earthbound again in the drunkenness of Noah with no redemption in sight. Our history is littered with creativity turned to destructive purposes and so, however much we laud its achievements, it needs supplementing by other more humane capacities if we hope for a better world. In itself creativity needs an inner guidance. Morality did not have any influence on Odysseus in his fabulous fabricated stories to escape from the difficult circumstances in which he found himself. Survival was all. However, as a social metaphor it is not conducive to improving our lot. So in Plato’s *Apology* of Socrates we find Socrates speaking of his ‘*daimonion*’, an inner voice that warned him of his mistakes but did not tell him what he should do. Today we would call it the voice of our conscience.

*‘One of the unexpected things art can do for us is teach us how to suffer more successfully.’*<sup>14</sup> (de Botton & Armstrong 2013) This thought also has ancient origins, for instance in ancient Epidaurus in Greece where the sick were brought to recover by sleeping between the statues of Apollo and Dionysus. The Isenheim altarpiece painted by Matthias Grünewald in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century offered similar consolation to those who were desperately ill, through the contemplation of the life, suffering and resurrection of Christ in the Antonine hospital in Colmar. These long-gone practices cannot, of course, have the efficacy they once had. We don’t need the stomach-churning paintings of Cindy Sherman, Sartre’s novel *Nausea* or Fellini’s tortuous film *La Strada* to acknowledge the cruelty, suffering and pain in the world. But they do help because they become shared experience. In the art gallery, book or cinema we are sharing these perceptions with others. And what these artists bring through their art is the hidden capacity to create that is in itself originally rooted in play. In our world of individuality the arts can assure us that we are not alone. We are not the only ones who experience the world in this way and by communicating these insights of pain and sorrow we move beyond being immersed just within the boundaries of ourselves. The melancholia and resignation in the musical genre of the Portuguese Fado or the chansons of Jacques Brel turn fate and suffering into song and thereby raise it to another level on the scale of emotions.

*“Once we believed that only gods knew how to mould worlds or to eradicate them. For good or ill man is now his own god: both a world builder and a destroyer of worlds. Perhaps we have no right to possess such powers, which might yet prove our undoing. But it is too late to regret the audacity of the uncontrollable, invaluable beings who first questioned the limits placed on*

*our thoughts and dreams, supplemented nature with their own creations, and came to be known – for want of a better word – as artists.”<sup>15</sup>*  
(Conrad. 2007)

Creativity is not always about the grand and enduring. The little acts of daily life can be creative for all of us. The arts can awaken, arouse, inspire, encourage and challenge us by touching our emotions, eliciting thoughts, and pushing us to create by learning from others. *‘The people I most admire are those who are sensitive and want to create something or discover something, and do not see life in terms of power...They produce literature and art, or they do disinterested scientific research, or they may be what is called “ ‘ordinary people’, who are creative in their ordinary lives, bring up children decently, or help their neighbours.”<sup>16</sup>* (E.M. Forster. 1951) Perhaps the main and optimistic conclusion from all our histories is that ‘neighbourliness’ in all its forms is the most important of the creative arts, and the Arts can assist us in finding that quality in ourselves, if we allow them to teach us how to look, hear and feel.

*“It is imperative that we give up the idea of ultimate sources of knowledge and admit that all knowledge is human: that it is mixed with our errors, our prejudices, our dreams, and our hopes: that all we can do is to grope for truth even though it is beyond our reach.”<sup>17</sup>* (Popper. 2002) The arts give us a sense of destination which we all need in our lives, especially in these times, and give us subtle hints as what that destination might be, as well as enabling us to accept that in the multitude of all our pluricultural landscapes of consciousnesses our destinations are not the same. But at least we are not alone on our journey because the arts help us share and hopefully understand more about our emotions and our nature, and to better understand others. Yet we should still approach the topic of creativity with a certain humility. Creativity is a protean gift and whether we try to catch it through myth or neuroscience it continues to elude our grasp. Therein lies its joy.

## BIOGRAPHY

Christopher Clouder was the founding director of the Botin Platform for Innovation in Education and is the Director of Pedagogy at the Liceo dei Colli in Florence. From 1989 to 2012 he was the founder and CEO of the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education that spanned 27 European countries. He started his career as a teacher, working with children with behavioural difficulties in a Steiner school for special needs. He taught in a high school in Holland for five years and then for 18 years in two Steiner high schools in the UK. He is now a freelance speaker, writer, a school consultant and is considered an authority on Steiner, creative and innovative education.

He has lectured worldwide, written and compiled books and articles, and given keynotes at international conferences on contemporary educational and cultural subjects. In 1997 he co-established the Alliance for Childhood, a global network which campaigns for the right of young children to experience their childhood in a healthy and fulfilling way. Christopher is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and an Associate of the Learning for Well-being community based in Brussels. He has made presentations in the EU Parliament and been instrumental in gaining public funding for Steiner education in England,

worked closely with educational policymakers and shared platforms with many academics. He receives many invitations to lecture internationally and is engaged in research into the evolution of cultures and their artistic expression. He is active in promoting the arts as a fundamental right for all children during their school years. His aim is to serve in building bridges between educational cultures, be they political, social, cultural or academic by creating a sense of solidarity, renewal and understanding for the benefit of children worldwide.  
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## ENDNOTES

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