Creative Destruction

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“Creativity is defined as the tendency to generate or recognize ideas, alternatives, or possibilities that may be useful in solving problems, communicating with others, and entertaining ourselves and others,” (p. 396, Franken). Creativity roots itself in something so intensely personal even scholarly definitions cannot articulate creativity in a way that serves it justice. It is the drive that all of humanity encounters as they strive to create something where there was nothing before, but something even beyond that. All people whether they be engineers, designers, artists, writers, business professionals, teachers, the list goes on, experience this innovation and desire to create something that was not there before in themselves and in others. As pervasive as this is though, the source of creativity remains in contention, especially for those who rise above the rest with their world changing pieces. These people, ranging from Pablo Picasso, to Michael Jackson, to Albert Einstein, reached a level few of us will ever attain; but what pushes a human being to that higher tier remains the question. Teresa Amabile, PhD in Psychology and Head of the Entrepreneurial Management Unit at the Harvard Business School, created an outline that assumes the basis of creativity is from knowledge, creative thinking, and motivation. This essentially means the understanding an individual has about something, how they approach it, and why they are interested (p. 3, Adams). However, this is directly in conflict with another theory, those that rely more heavily on the “nature” part of “nature vs nurture.” They believe that a human being with exceptional creative talent is simply genetically disposed to create works of a higher nature, regardless of training, upbringing, or any other influence. This theory, though, implies that no others can reach an astounding level of creativity regardless of how hard they work or where they come from. This theory is in direct contrast to the opposite argument that nurture and environment are
the biggest influences. This belief is rooted in the idea that receiving training while growing up, encouragement, and extreme dedication can alter the creative talent of an individual. However, our focus will rest in a branch of this theory that is gaining interest. It is the idea that included in nurture and upbringing, there is the element of trauma. The idea of the “tortured artist” is a widely known concept, the artist who suffers from psychological disorders or grows up in bad situations, and then later channels that into masterful works of art. For the purposes of this idea, the definition of trauma in use is: “Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster,” (“Trauma,” American Psychological Association). Through digging into famous examples of artists coming from this background, observing the most extreme examples of mental disorders and creativity, and examining the links between trauma and creativity in modern society, one can further see the power behind this idea.

Many innovators in their field illustrate this concept of seeking to create after something in their life was taken away, and, not only that, they seek to restore and remedy issues that directly correlate with their own. In keeping with the idea that it is not only artists that are creators, these innovators seek to create across a variety of fields for numerous causes.

Actress Charlize Theron went on to have an extremely successful acting career; however, most do not know the events of her childhood. She was born in South Africa, and her father was known to be an abusive alcoholic. After an altercation one night, she witnessed her mother shoot her father and he died shortly thereafter (Charlize Theron," Bio.com). Regardless of this, she has gone on to not only win an academy award, but also become a UN Messenger of Peace. Through this role, she has committed
her efforts to HIV prevention as well as halting violence against women in Africa ("Charlize Theron," United Nations Messengers of Peace). She has gone as far as to start her own organization, The Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project (CTAOP), dedicated to African youth HIV Prevention. Out of the loss of so much to violence, she has gone on to improve the quality of others’ lives, so they no longer have to fear what came to pass in her own life.

Stephen Hawking is one of the most acclaimed scientists alive today, responsible for creating ideas about the fundamental nature of the universe that opened up entirely new fields of study. Most impressively though, he did all of this after being diagnosed with ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or Lou Gehrig’s Disease), which slowly shut down the nerves that controlled his muscles. Regardless of the disease, he pioneered theories about the nature of black holes and furthered the research into the “Big Bang” Theory ("Stephen Hawking," Bio.com). He goes on to say these difficulties may have only strengthened his ability to reason through these discoveries, “I wouldn't have had good scientific ideas if I had thought more normally. If I felt completely pressureless I don't think I would have gone in this pattern.” First off, this lends credence to the idea that not only does trauma and destruction contribute to the process of creation, but it may be one of the influences responsible for the origins of the ideas in the first place. Ultimately though, this serves to show that while someone may seem to be trapped in an ever-shrinking space through the trauma of disease, they find ways for us all to understand and reach out to the vastness around us.

Frida Kahlo is one of the greatest embodiments of this concept. At the age of six, she suffered from polio, damaging her right leg and foot. In 1925, she was involved in a
bus accident where she was impaled by an iron handrail as well as shattered her leg, broke her pelvis, spine, collarbone, and several ribs. This accident also left her unable to bear children. While being bedridden, where others would simply obsess over the unfair situation, she took the time to perfect her painting style and art form ("Frida Kahlo," Bio.com). Later in life, Frida struggled with several miscarriages and constant pain from her injuries, but always continued creating deeply personal works that could touch and alter those who viewed them.

Overall, these contrasting creators serve to reinforce the concept that people seek to create where something has been destroyed, and trials only serve to direct where their work is needed the most.

An important issue to include is that of those deeply inventive people who experience the trauma of mental illness, whether that be depression or a full mental break of schizophrenia (Shaw, Creativity and Affect). As illustrated by the last section, these individuals serve to expand on this idea, but also maintain the fact that creation is creation regardless of the field one is pursuing.

Those who are familiar with the film A Beautiful Mind recognize the main character John Nash as being the central character. For those unfamiliar, A Beautiful Mind revolves around real word Mathematician John Forbes Nash. He is responsible for major contributions to game theory, differential geometry, and partial differential equations, used in subjects from economics to artificial intelligence, and he is the recipient of several Nobel prizes. However, he did this all while struggling with a paranoid schizophrenia diagnosis, considered to be one of the most extreme forms of schizophrenia ("John F. Nash Jr.," Bio.com). His story serves to show that even trauma
that should debilitate one’s mind could also serve to strengthen and widen its perspectives. At one point, he said, “People are always selling the idea that people with mental illness are suffering. I think madness can be an escape. If things are not so good, you maybe want to imagine something better.” In this disconnected “madness,” Nash went on to imagine many things that changed the way human beings perceive the actual world around us.

On the other end of the creative spectrum, we have Nathaniel Ayers, an extremely talented musician who only received attention after being written about by writer Steve Lopez and being the subject of the movie The Soloist. Diagnosed with schizophrenia after starting at The Julliard School, he was removed from classes, received treatment to no avail, and eventually ended up living on the streets for years afterwards. Writer Steve Lopez developed a relationship with Ayers and slowly assisted him in his recovery. Nathaniel is a prime example of the power of creating. Through the trials of his life both before and during the mental illness, he has found joy in working with the gifts he has, even if most would not consider them so. This is best illustrated in a piece Lopez wrote about Ayers after a conversation. “‘All I want to do is play music, and the crisis I’m having is right here. This one’s gone,’ he says of the missing top string, ‘that one’s gone, and this little guy’s almost out of commission.’ His goal in life, Nathaniel tells me, is to figure out how to replace the strings. But he got used to playing imperfect instruments while taking music classes in Cleveland’s public schools, and there’s a lot you can do, he assures me, with just two strings,’” (“Steve Lopez Quotes," Good Reads). Even in the throes of a debilitating disease while living on the streets with access to no real musical equipment, Nathaniel understood the value of creating something beautiful for those
around him, regardless of their means or position in life. His escape from the unending voices and hallucinations that plagued him came in the form of creating something peaceful for everyone else.

This examination of original thinkers is simply to serve as further evidence that trauma of any kind can lend to something greater. The first section dealt with those who had troubles inflicted upon them physically by the world around them, but this serves more to illustrate that even when the ordeal is coming from one’s own mind, it does not diminish their ability to create something in place of what they have lost.

Lastly, there is a need to take a step back from individuals, and look at the modern take as a whole on trauma and creativity’s place therein.

Many modern researchers draw the connection between creativity and trauma due to the reflective nature of art (p. 76, Shaw). They cite many pieces dealing with difficult subject matter as a method for people to channel prior grief into something that not only helps them cope with the event, but also creates a dialogue and informs the audience about the issue at hand. This in turn takes their trauma and turns it into a vessel for change and positivity in the surrounding world. Now there is a large trend in utilizing creativity as treatment in two fields dealing with trauma, childhood trauma and PTSD. Psychologists focusing on trauma in children say that the childhood gravitation towards creativity most likely stems from children having to act like adults in situations that require great responsibility and maturity (Miller, Alice. The Untouched Key). This leads to them not being able to relate to others similar in age, and after this rejection by their peers, they seek out new avenues to express themselves and what they have been through (Brown, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Childhood). This corresponds with PTSD
patients as well, whether they be the survivors of shootings, the military, assaults, or any other far reaching events. They experience this same withdrawal from their normal support structure in order to find more constructive avenues of expressing their views. After going further into creative practices, they tend to receive more understanding from those around them, thus reinforcing the process overall. All of this feeds back into the overall idea of a trauma fueling creation, but also adds another element. These studies show it now seems that trauma not only stems from those trying to replace what they have lost with something new, but also the need to connect with others after being isolated by some events beyond most people’s realm of experience. Through what people create, they are attempting to provide the means to shift other’s perspectives to where their own now lies, creating further far-reaching growth out of the destruction.

Overall, this is not to say the other aforementioned theories of nature vs. nurture or intense drive have no validity. It is more to highlight one avenue creativity can be reached through. It has been exemplified time and time again by individuals considered to be at the pinnacle of human creativity, outreach, and all things that give back to the world around them. For most, if not all, of human history, human beings have strived to create, but that drive becomes so much stronger in those of us who know what it is like to be faced with the absence of what we cherish most.
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