

THE SPIRIT OF CREATIVITY

Basic Mechanisms of Creative Achievements

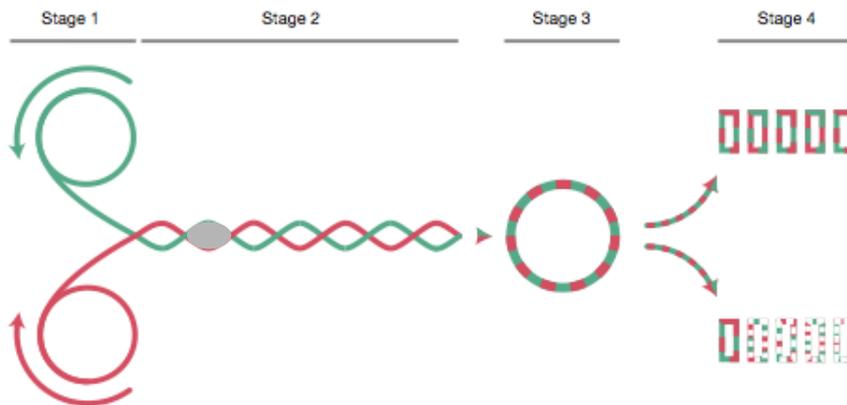
2.32 Phase of Inspiration

During a state of high inspiration our ideas flow like magma in a volcanic eruption.

Gottlieb Guntern

The Creative Process

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An inspiration appears suddenly and unexpectedly, like a flash of lightning out of the blue. In the atmosphere, a lightning flash is due to the sudden electrical discharge of opposite charges occurring between two clouds, or between a cloud and the earth. Inspiration is due to a kind of mental short-circuit suddenly connecting the two force fields of the unconscious and the conscious mind. It is fair to assume that some form- or content-specific resonance between unconscious and conscious ideas is responsible for the short-circuiting that produces a flash of inspiration. In his autobiography, Frank Lloyd Wright (Gill 1987, 360) thusly described his state of inspiration: "The birds began singing again below the house of Taliesin; dry grass on the hillside turned green, and the hollyhocks went gaily into a second blooming . . . What a release of pent-up energy—the making of those plans! Ideas came tumbling up and out onto paper . . ."

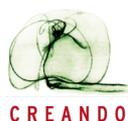
From a neurobiological perspective, we may state that inspiration implies the sudden simultaneous firing of millions of interconnected neurons. In the course of repetitive unconscious and conscious learning, these neurons are connected by protein bridges or dendrites, forming synaptic clefts with the body or axon of other neurons. These bridges permit the mental associations between different ideas to occur. The synchronized bioelectrical discharge of neuronal cell assemblies is subjectively experienced as a jolt, as an arousing, startling event. That is why, in the nineteenth century,

psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso (Lombroso 1988) erroneously assumed that inspiration was the functional equivalent of a focal epileptic attack.

The creative individual is almost always in a relaxed mode of operation when inspiration hits home. Inspiration is a state of grace requiring no effort; ideas gush out spontaneously from the well of our mind. Russian poet Alexander Pushkin (Briggs 1983, 45) wrote about “. . . that blessed state of spirit . . . when verses lie down before your pen and ringing rhymes run to meet up with a nicely turned thought.” In contradistinction to this highly elegant formulation, Honoré de Balzac (Parini 1989), whose youth had been marked by Napoleon Bonaparte’s grab for imperial power and international grandeur, offered a more pathetic, although equally dynamic, account of his states of inspiration, writing that ideas “. . . pour out like the regiments of the Grand Army over the battlefield, and the battle begins. Memories come charging in with flags flying; the light cavalry of comparison extends itself in a magnificent gallop; the artillery of logic hurries along with its ammunition train, and flashes of wit bob up like sharpshooters.”

Sometimes the suddenly inspired individual is involved in activities that may have little or nothing to do with the content of inspiration. Amadeus Mozart (Ghiselin 1985a, 11) is supposed to have said that his ideas flowed best when he was “completely myself, entirely alone, and of good cheer—say, travelling in a carriage, or walking after a good meal, or during the night when I cannot sleep . . .” Although the historical source of this statement is questionable (Solomon 1988, 129), the quoted phrases fit not only a concept of inspiration fashionable in Mozart’s time, but also many an individual’s personal experience with respect to the phase of inspiration. Later, however, in the Romantic period, authors writing on creativity often took *pars pro toto*: they mistook the phase of inspiration (as well as the phase of illumination) for the whole creative process, as if the complex creative performance of an individual resembled the spontaneous activity of a silkworm spinning its thread in a self-generated and completely effortless manner.

A relaxed mood often favors the emergence of inspiration, but the sheer opposite of a relaxed mood may produce the same effect. Physical pain is rarely inspiring, but the pain of our soul is. Doubt, uncertainty, unhappiness, fear, anxiety, despair, a tortured state of mind are all able to trigger a strong inspiration. The blues was invented and sung by slaves treated worse than animals. Mozart composed his famous *Requiem* in a state of sheer despair. Many great paintings, and God knows how many plays and novels, have been inspired by mental suffering. On June 8, 1962, Bob Dylan’s girlfriend Suze Rotolo boarded a ship and left for Perugia, Italy, because she was young and beautiful and willing to get more out of life than the often harsh treatment Bob had in store for her. He was very unhappy about her departure. When she was in Italy, she was reluctant to take his phone calls, and wasn’t eager to answer his letters either. He understood that she slipped away from him and he was so torn apart that he couldn’t sleep anymore. Tortured by a mix of self-reproach, self-pity, misery, rebellion, and helpless anger, he began to write the lyrics to “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right.” Then he



composed the music for that song and performed it. The ambiguity of the lyrics, the power of expression, and the suggestive metaphors made the song an instant hit. Dylan entered a state of inspired frenzy—while Suze enjoyed Perugia and the attention of a young and attractive admirer named Enzo Bartoccioli and didn't waste her time with Dylan's pleadings for her to come home—and began to write one song after another. As his friend and fellow musician Mark Spoelstra (Sounes 2001, 121) remembers Dylan would sit in Gerde's Folk City and write on napkins while everybody else kept talking and drinking: "And you couldn't interrupt it. He was driven, and obviously enlightened." Dylan's reaction to his pain illustrates the Australian folk tale of the thorn-bird that will sing only one single song in its life: when the spikes of a thorn-bush pierce its body so that it can't move anymore and is about to die. In 1964, Suze had an abortion and after a long and bitter argument with Bob, she was practically thrown out of the apartment in which she lived with her sister Carla. Although he had been unfaithful to her and had indulged in a barely hidden on-off relationship with the singer and guitar player Joan Baez, he was very unhappy about the break-up with Suze. The pain of this loss inspired him to write the highly emotional, lamenting "Ballad in Plain D."

Happiness and unhappiness, relaxation and inner tension, are opposites. How can we explain that these opposites are equally helpful in bringing about a phase of inspiration? The following model helps us to understand the puzzle.

