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The Joy of Inquiry

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In this article, the author reflects on his own educational experiences as a starting point for an exploration of the way that education can be a joyful process if framed as an opportunity for creative inquiry. The author outlines some dimensions of an attitude of creative inquiry, focusing on Wonder, Passion, Hope, and Conviviality. The author then explores a number of different metaphors for inquiry and the way they can frame our attitude and evoke different moods.

Keywords: creative inquiry; creativity; culture; education; transformative learning

If science strikes the contemporary literary mind as essentially boring, that is because the crucial importance of imagination and insight in scientific discovery has too often been played down. Somehow, the routine phases of scientific consolidation have come to be regarded as more respectable and “rational.”

Toulmin (1982, p. 95)

The old view was based upon clear and distinct ideas and was ushered in by Descartes, among other thinkers. It gave birth to the belief that concepts could be clearly and uniformly defined, that the world could be considered a closed system and understood in the same way that a machine could be understood. Underlying the old view was a single, unified point of view; a viewpoint originally attributed to God but subsequently adopted as the objective eye of science.

The new view, on the other hand, will be based upon ambiguity, upon alternate realities, as well as upon multiple points of view of observers who cannot be abstracted from what they are observing.

Low (2002, p. 5)

I mentioned to someone the other day that I was writing an article on joy. Knowing my background as a professional musician in London in the 80s, he assumed I was going to regale readers with sordid tales of the joy of sex, drugs, and rock ’n roll. When I told him that I had actually chosen to write about the joy of academic inquiry,
I might as well have told him I was a vegan writing an entry in the *International Encyclopedia of Organ Meats* or a mortician funding life extension research. Academic inquiry—and arguably any kind of inquiry beyond “Googleing”—has a bad rap, it seems. In these pages, I’d like to address some of the ways that I think inquiry, and specifically the academic kind, can be an enormously joyful, creative, and indeed transformative process. In what will no doubt be recognized as a stroke of marketing genius, I call inquiry that is characterized by joy, wonder, passion, hope, and conviviality *creative inquiry* (Montuori, 2005; 2006).

### A Tale of Two Headmasters

In the mid- to late sixties, I was living in Greece. Five days a week, my father would drop me off at the little Italian primary school in downtown Athens, run by the jovial and brilliant headmaster Alessandro Sarno. Sarno pretty much ruined me for education for the next 20 years or so. His classes were chaotic, exciting, sometimes riveting, sometimes intense, and always fun. I remember more from the 2 years of classes I had with Sarno than just about all of primary school, high school, and my undergraduate education combined. Sarno managed to make the multiplication tables an adventure, a treasure hunt for patterns, connections, relationships. One of the driest and traditionally most mind-numbing aspects of Italian grammar, *analisi logica*, which translates as the riveting “logical analysis”—two words that would not typically send a young child into paroxysms of delight—became an adventure and a challenge to dig deeply and use all of our young minds to solve the series of puzzles he presented us with. Inquiry became a source of joy. Sarno seemed to treat us all as if we were preadolescent geniuses. His reaction to a poor performance consisted in a puzzled look that said, “What happened? You can do SO much better than that. . . .” Consequently, and perhaps paradoxically, he gave us just the sort of bump we needed to make sure that next time we would exceed his expectations—and certainly our own too.

Sarno was no wooly minded, “right-brain” New-Ager, mind you. He was a chubby, middle-aged, ex-pat Neapolitan schoolteacher with great depth of knowledge, insight, remarkable vitality, and a real belief in children and their potential. He believed in our capacity for learning, our ability to grow, and had a deep understanding of the relationship between learning, motivation, and fun. When I said he ruined me for education, I meant that after his classes, all other classes seemed to be horribly boring.

I remember very little about my classes in the high school picturesquely located between Victoria Station and Buckingham Palace in London. With its brick towers blackened by pollution, it looked like the main building in the popular BBC show *Colditz*, about a prison in Nazi Germany during World War II and the endless, relentless, and very understandable escape attempts of brave Allied flyers. The school’s chief claim to fame, in my mind if not anybody else’s, is that in the opening shots of
my favorite television series *The Prisoner*, you could clearly see (or so I liked to think) my school was on the same street as the prisoner’s house. Yes, school was boring. Or should I say, classes were boring. After all, this was the tail end of swinging London: the first stirrings of the punk explosion of 1976 and my school’s diverse inner city student body exposed me to a rich pageant of humanity and to the many colorful ways young people were entertaining themselves in those days.

But after Alessandro Sarno, I knew that education did not have to be a crushing bore. I wrote a letter to the high school magazine asking the headmaster, “Chalkey” White, why Latin class had to be so unbelievably dull. Being a Latin teacher himself, I figured he was very well placed to clue me in. Mr. White’s authoritative reply to my question about the boredom factor in Latin in the next issue of the magazine was that Latin just *is* boring, and there’s nothing we can do about it. At this point, a further lesson from Sarno became crystal clear. Chalkey wasn’t talking about Latin at all. He was talking about himself, and his own understanding of Latin, of education, and of life, I suspect. Alessandro Sarno had not just taught me about a series of subjects. He had given me a further lesson in how subjects might be *approached*, about an attitude toward learning, education, and knowledge: a lesson in *inquiry*, in how to be in the world, how to find wonder, passion, and excitement and fascination. Perhaps most importantly, he had shown me that inquiry was about finding more and more wonder in the world, that the ability to see wonder or drudgery was a function of the knower. And he modeled a passion for how to make sense of the mystery of life and how to live with it—a metalesson, if you will, a lesson about lessons. It was about what it means to live a life in which we create meaning, rather than simply “download” the party line. Sarno had shown me that the quality of my learning experience was dependent on a number of factors, including the attitudes the teacher and student brought to education. Much later, I came to realize that in Sarno’s classroom, education was a creative process.

Sadly, Chalkey White’s view of education was based on the assumption that “life is what it is,” without considering the possibility that this “is” was open to discussion. So Chalkeyan education was about *reproduction*: reproduction of the material being taught, of certain ways of thinking, of a limited and limiting perspective on life, of a social order, of a way of being. . . .

While we see ourselves as using knowledge, it may be more accurate to say that what we know is using us: We are drawn into responding to all that occurs around us. (Tulku, 1984, p. 69)

These two educational experiences have haunted me for years. As I have also become an educator, I increasingly feel I need to dig deeper into the meaning of these experiences. I increasingly see a large number of people who describe education in the same way that I experienced most of my schooling—dull, unchallenging, and even painful. A few fortunate people consider their educational experiences a highlight of their lives, but sadly most don’t.
Over the years, I have come to think of my experiences with Professor Sarno and Mr. White as representing two fundamentally different forms of education. The former, inspired by Sarno, I have called **creative inquiry**, where education is seen as a joyful process of inquiry, where the person is engaged in a collaborative process of self-creation and self-understanding, as well as creating an understanding of the world. The process of learning is seen as a creative process applying to the person(s), the process, and the product. The other kind of learning I refer to as **Reproductive Education**. Here, the *summum bonum* is only to reproduce the knowledge offered by the instructor, and to become a certain kind of person who will be able to fit into a mechanized, bureaucratized society. To be clear, creative inquiry does not reject such aspects of traditional education as memorizing, developing a knowledge base, and in fact being able to reproduce the knowledge one has gathered at appropriate times. But it sees them as a means to an end, not an end in and of themselves—which they arguably are in the context of a test-driven education.

As an analogy, we might think of the education of a jazz artist and the development of musical competence. To improvise on her chosen instrument, a jazz performer has to develop a specific set of skills, an understanding of music theory, instrumental proficiency, and so on. But the purpose of those skills is not simply to demonstrate that the skills are adequately developed—to “regurgitate them” at an exam and then promptly forget them. It is ultimately to be able to participate in the jazz community and create her own music, dialogue with other musicians, expressing her feelings, thoughts, aspirations, and so on. Contrast her with another kind of musician who practices very hard and then goes on stage to show off his technique. And although this may lead to demonstrations of remarkable and even impressive dexterity, such music is most often empty.

An artist is someone who can integrate the technique and let go of it in order to **say something**. Typically, this occurs in a context with others, to develop a musical dialogue. In other words, it is to take all that material and use it as the basis for the development of her own vision, her own voice, and her own participation in the world. The legendary guitarist Robert Fripp is known for his phenomenal technique, and for his methodical practicing. But he has made it clear that all that practicing just goes out the window in performance. At that time, he simply **plays**, and becomes a vehicle for the music to come through him. As was the case with John Coltrane, the practicing provides him with such a high degree of technical competence that he is arguably open to receiving more, and is not constrained by technical limitations.

**Culture Contrasts and Clashes**

Does knowing that knowledge cannot be guaranteed by a foundation not mean that we have already acquired a first fundamental knowledge? And should this not lead us to abandon the architectural metaphor, in which the term *foundation* assumes an
indispensable meaning, in favor of a musical metaphor of construction in movement that transforms in its very movement the constitutive elements that form it? And might we not also consider the knowledge of knowledge as a construction in movement? (Morin, 1986, pp. 21-22)

Our way of knowing and acting in our world, continually reinforced by our cultural conditioning, has established a complex interlocking system. Everything—language, educational systems, economies, commerce, politics, and social institutions—is dependent on everything else. Underlying this great superstructure are our concepts, beliefs, assumptions, values, and attitudes, which are linked together like an underground network of pipelines connecting across a vast continent. (Tulku, 1984, p. 66)

An Italian citizen, I was born in Holland and grew up living in Lebanon, Greece, and England. My parents were diplomats and we made yearly visits to Holland, Italy, and Switzerland to see family. In this very privileged context, I became fascinated by the differences in cultures. They all seemed like different realities, different worlds, with their different beliefs, habits, customs, and expectations about what constituted acceptable behavior for little boys—and older boys. Why could grown men in Naples and other Southern European cities walk arm in arm along the waterfront in a leisurely manner, chatting about this and that, and why was the possibility of men merely brushing against each other in England a thought almost too hideous to contemplate for schoolboy minds—and with the expectation that it would immediately have to be followed by the inevitable “sorry,” or better, “awfully sorry?”

The world seemed to be filled with mystery and unknowns. The process of navigating these cultures with their different customs left me in constant inquiry. This is another way of saying that I wanted to find out what the hell was going on in all these places, how people behaved, how I was expected to behave, and why. Above all, I became interested in why things apparently had to be a certain way in some places, and why they had to be different—with the same certainty, with the same feeling of “it’s just got to be this way”—in other places. These were puzzling questions for a nosy kid. I developed a “passion for possibilities.” The exposure to different cultures early on gave me a sense of the plasticity of human beings, of the creativity in cultures, but also of the way in which one could become trapped in one’s own creations without realizing they were, in fact, one’s own creations . . .

I became particularly fascinated by how some beliefs and behaviors were considered “absolutes” in one culture and positively bizarre in another. Cultural relativity hit me upside the head pretty early in the game. I was exposed to different cultures without ever really belonging to one. This led me to question things that from the perspective of a specific culture (“inside” it) seemed perfectly natural. What was “given,” “natural,” “obvious,” and even absolute in one culture might seem bizarre and weird if not plain wrong or even bad in another. And it was only through being in different cultures that I could begin to look at these taken-for-granted aspects of life with a different eye. The older I got, the more I noticed differences that were
both fascinating and, I soon found out, the source of historical dislikes, conflicts, and unspeakable horrors. Throughout it all, I realized that never having lived in the country that issued my passport, I always felt like a foreigner, and outsider. And on some deep level, I knew that was just fine.

The whole question of culture was closely tied to my identity. Who or what was I, my young friends wondered? Italian? Dutch? Greek? English? It seems that wherever I was, I had to identify myself, but in ways that somehow did not reflect the complexity of my background. I felt a definition froze me somehow, “thingified” me. My experience seemed more about an ongoing movement, a journey in a series of contexts rather than a fixed thing. More like an ongoing musical improvisation, an emergent result of the interaction with other people, ideas, and environments than a fixed score that was the same wherever it was played.

I could “pass” for a native in any number of countries, from England to Greece to Holland to Italy. My passport said I was Italian, but despite visiting several times a year, I had never actually lived there. My mother is Dutch, and my favorite football team was Ajax Amsterdam—that counted for a lot. Even though I could swear better in Greek than in any other language, I didn’t feel 100% Greek, and the Greek kids always treated me like the “Italian Greek.” Later, I lived in England and did a good impersonation of a Cockney Sparrow. In high school, my name was turned into the very British “Monty,” and as far as everyone was concerned, I was English.

Culture for me was far from a few quaint customs other people have. Culture and nationality were for me fairly substantial issues that got to the heart of my identity. Cultural choices, conscious and unconscious, willing and unwilling, shaped who I became. Around age 12, after we moved to England, I started thinking in English. I realized later that thinking in different languages actually made me see the world differently, and thinking about an issue in Dutch would lead me to make different choices than, say, thinking about them in English.

I was always fascinated by different cultures and ways of being in the world, and even by worlds that seemed radically opposed to each other. During the day, for a time, I had a gig as an interpreter for Scotland Yard. I would run around in my Inspector Clouseau raincoat looking very officious, interpreting during interrogations and court cases, visiting prisons, and participating in searching the premises where the “suspects” lived. At night, I played in bands on London’s mid-70s post-punk scene. Later, Record Mirror magazine described my band, The Remipeds, as “rowdy psychedelic tropical punk” or something along those lines, and rowdy we certainly were.

Going for a drink after work with police inspectors in the “Special Branch” was quite different from going to a pub after a rehearsal with my band. It gave me a whole new insight into how to be in a pub, what to look for. The inspectors spotted every transaction under every table, knew the criminal record of many of the men walking in and out, and were aware of the history of the pub and some of the livelier events that had taken place there. They were, fortunately, off duty and not in any mood to do more than simply look around with their “usual eyes,” as it were—eyes
that saw that pub in a very different way than I did. Indeed, as a rebellious musician, as an undercover member of the counterculture, I might have had a tendency to look favorably on precisely the people the men from the Special Branch might be tempted to put behind bars.

There were also, unquestionably, more terrifying aspects to the worlds and differences I saw. How was it possible, my naïve 14-year-old jazz-fan mind wondered, that Dave Brubeck had been asked to tour the South of the United States as long as he left his Black bass player at home? I remember being outraged, because this happened in my lifetime. This was unimaginable to me. So many of my heroes, from Muhammad Ali to Pele to Charlie Parker, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter and, later, Richard Pryor and Ishmael Reed, were Black. A few years later, I was performing with my band at Rock against Racism concerts, still not much wiser about the complex dynamics of stereotyping and racism, but at least driven by youthful outrage. When, one night after a gig in the then not-so-trendy Notting Hill district of London, my band’s van was surrounded by a group of irate, iron-bar-wielding thugs, the first thing the police asked when they finally showed up was, “Were they Black?” “No,” we pointed out to the officers, “they were White.” But there were Black people inside the van.

Racism and stereotyping and prejudice seemed to me to be a closure of inquiry. Researchers have shown that authoritarian, prejudiced individuals have a high susceptibility to environmental pressures: under the stress of change, of the unknown, the unforeseen, they become anxious, angry, and look for someone to blame for their discomfort. A scene from a Spike Lee movie Do the Right Thing provides another, related perspective. Spike plays Mookie, a nerdy kid who works in Sal’s Pizzeria. Pino, Sal’s son, regularly spouts racist stereotypes about African Americans, and Mookie finally busts him by asking him who his favorite sports stars are, what music he likes best, and so on. It becomes clear that African Americans play a key role in Pino’s life. Many of the most important aspects of his life are deeply, profoundly influenced and shaped by African Americans.

The self does not want to know at the cost of losing its primacy in the overall scheme of things. It will not let itself acknowledge such “knowings”; it would rather keep on playing with belief systems which seem to deal satisfactorily with the problems it has, but which instead—due to the inherent limitations of these beliefs—create a deep sense of estrangement, guilt, fear, and limited ability. (Tulku, 1990, p. 239)

“Look deeper, Pino,” Mookie is saying. Mookie is asking Pino to engage in inquiry about his life, his choices, his preferences, and his love-and-hate relationship with African Americans, to go beyond the stereotypes that (mis)inform his racist talk. To me, that’s as powerful a case for inquiry as any. But do we know how to do that sort of thing, as a people, in our culture? Does anybody even show us how to begin this self-inquiry? And when our concept of the self is limited to what Allan Watts (2006, p. 76) called “the skin-encapsulated ego,” it is almost inevitable that much of what passes for self-inquiry can drift into the sickly quagmire of narcissism.
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How We Think We Know What We Know

The attitudes we adopt in carrying out our investigation shape the attributes we find in the world we investigate. (Tulku, 1987, p. 307)

Along with music, my other obsession was, and still is, books. When I was old enough to start browsing book stores with my mother, I came across the books of Peter Kolosimo, an Italian popular writer who had collected stories of mysterious events, from UFOs to monsters to lost continents. I’m not sure the scholarship was exactly impeccable, but they certainly gave a young boy a kick-start into terminal weirdness. I later started reading Carlos Castaneda, Georges Gurdjieff, Herman Hesse, Colin Wilson, Timothy Leary, and Robert Anton Wilson. These unorthodox readings had a profound effect on my adolescent mind. I became fascinated by the idea that there were things out there that seemed to have no explanation, yet.

Later, I became even more interested in how people respond to questions about UFOs and similar apparently unexplained phenomena. I found some people dismissed anything unexplained out of hand—saying, for instance, that UFOs were all just weather balloons or hoaxes. Others seemed convinced the UFOs were piloted by strange beings, which some even claimed to have met. Both believers and nonbelievers seemed to know with unquestionable certainty what was going on—in every case, it seemed! For others, the phenomena appeared more complex. This was usually accompanied by a more extensive use of qualifiers and the recognition that there could be multiple interpretations of the phenomenon in question. To me, this was a welcome sign of uncertainty and of willingness to explore and inquire with some willingness to remain open to outcomes. Some ufologists approached the UFO phenomenon through the lens of a Jungian mythological and archetypal revival, others as a government plot, an alien plot, an alien and government plot, geomagnetic phenomena, and so much more.

I became fascinated with how questions are approached, by issues of certainty and uncertainty, and by what I perceived to be the rigidity of certain positions, the “need to believe” and the “need to be right.” “I want to believe,” that memorable line from the X-Files television series, seems to apply to both dogmatic UFO believers and equally dogmatic nonbelievers. I always felt there was something profoundly boring about folks who claim to have figured it all out. Their motto seems to be the same one as the former CEO of ITT Harold Geneen: “No surprises.”

Somewhere between “I know” and “I don’t care” there seemed to be an opportunity to explore the world, as well as ourselves, through inquiry as a creative process. But is creative inquiry solely about creativity and making things up and excitement, as opposed to the serious business of learning the basics? Absolutely not. Creative inquiry does not by any means reject the development of a solid base in the accumulated knowledge of the ages. It incorporates the knowledge- and skill-building dimensions but also stresses that they can be approached creatively and enjoyably, that the way this material is taught can be exciting and fun, as Professor Sarno showed me, and not mind-numbing tedium.
But how to approach the issues we are not at all certain about? How to address the leading edge, the unknown, the unexpected, in a way that is scholarly yet risk taking and creative? This fascination with how we address situations of uncertainty and face our not-knowing led me to a second order of questioning. My interest became not just the question, but how we approach it. And I was not so much interested in research methodology as in **attitude**. It was clear that people approached questions in different ways. Discovering Castaneda, Leary, Wilson, and Gurdjieff as a 15-year-old introduced me to the possibility that there were ways of seeing and thinking and **being** in the worlds that were decidedly uncommon and had to do with one’s own state of mind, with consciousness, as well as culture . . .

Inquiry opens up worlds. Reproductive education tells me that this is how the world is, and these are the bits I need to memorize to function in it. In the language of the great cyberneticist Heinz Von Foerster, it assumes I am (or should be) a **trivial machine** (Von Foerster, 1983). In a trivial machine, the machine’s output is predictable by the input. Insert input A and, without fail, expect output B. The goal of Reproductive Education is to have the predictable output, as on the exam. It assumes the world is known and understood, and we have to internalize somebody else’s framework that organizes the bits so we can be good (re)productive citizens. Creative inquiry does not negate the necessity of learning basic skills and facts, but adds another, central element. The focus is not just on incorporating the already known. It is also, centrally, on our capacity for knowing, for making knowing a process of inquiry that allows us to challenge and explore and connect and create. It assumes we can be nontrivial machines. Insert input A, and good luck figuring out what will come out the other end. This means the output can be unexpected, and cannot be controlled. Not always desirable, apparently . . .

**Dimensions of Inquiry**

We social scientists would do well to hold back our eagerness to control that world which we so imperfectly understand. The fact of our imperfect understanding should not be allowed to feed our anxiety and so increase the need to control. Rather, our studies could be inspired by a more ancient, but today less honored motive: a curiosity about the world of which we are part. The rewards of such work are not power but beauty. (Bateson, 1972, p. 269)

Science as an existing, finished [corpus of knowledge] is the most objective, most impersonal [thing] human beings know, but science as coming into being, as aim, is just as subjective and psychologically conditioned as any other of man’s efforts. (Albert Einstein, as cited in Low, 2002, p. 42)

Discovery is not only uncovering by cool, objective logic and reason a structure lying dormant, but also a vital, exciting creation of relationships that enable this structure to emerge into consciousness. (Low, 2002, p. 43)
Inquiry is often associated with dry, analytical processes, with data collection, number crunching, and so on. What is almost always left out of the picture is that real inquiry is also a process that is deeply passionate, exciting, and creative. Read most (auto)biographies of scientists or philosophers or artists and you’ll be overwhelmed by emotions—from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the ecstatic to the petty, and from the humanitariam to the ego-driven and fiercely competitive. So, when I think of the “ingredients” of joy in creative inquiry, I can perhaps summarize them as the following: wonder, passion, hope, and conviviality.

Inquiry has always been a source of joy for me because it meant participation and engagement with the world. The world seemed complex, mysterious, and endlessly fascinating. My experience with different people and cultures and later different states of mind showed me that when people told me that’s “just the way things are,” it was not necessarily so, and I could typically find counterexamples to prove it. Inquiry meant exploration and feeling alive, it meant welcoming the mystery of life, not in order to control it but to more fully participate in it and, as Gregory Bateson (1972, p. 269) suggested, to find beauty in the world.

As a result, joy fuels a desire to understand the world, other people, and oneself in the process. Inquiry for me was inspired by, but also a producer of, wonder at the spectacular differences among peoples, the mysteries of human behavior and of emotion, as well as of nature, the unexplained and the half-forgotten, the repressed and denied and misunderstood. The more you inquire, the more the world is a source of wonder. This is sometimes expressed as “the deeper you look, the less you know,” in the sense that every new advance by science probably exposes more new unknowns. But this to me is a glass-half-full perspective, because the not-knowing, the ultimately unfathomable nature of the Universe, is precisely the source of this wonder. The world is not nearly as dull as Reproductive Education would have us believe . . .

The opposite of wonder for me is an attitude that has stopped inquiring, stopped going further, for whatever reason. It could be fear of the unknown, simple habituation, or just wanting to be right, and therefore not being open to anything new or different or unexpected, something that I may not be right about. This is the trap of “knowing,” of believing we know ourselves, our friends, our spouses, how the world “really” is, and becoming closed to novelty and change. It’s the trap of seeing knowledge above all as having a “position,” a position that has to be defended against the “opposition.” This is the metaphor of knowledge as war, knowledge as building the protective edifice of the ego.

The willingness to approach the world with a sense of wonder reminds us of our ignorance. But ignorance is not a calamity to be feared, but the result of the miracle of immersion in the mystery of life. All too often, schooling focuses on “the need to know,” on the accumulation of facts (what Freire, 2000, calls the “banking” metaphor), and the illusion of knowledge and even expertise. But I believe the real magic happens when we learn to wonder together, and that sense of wonder spurs us
to inquire together. Inquiry sees knowledge as an opportunity to explore our positions, explicit or implicit, to “lighten up,” to become more open to experience and inquiry and knowing rather than building a defensible position to be safeguarded against the attacks of others.

Inquiry for me is marked by *passion* (hooks, 1994), by a desire to understand and be understood, to plunge into these mysteries and to also figure out how best to approach perplexing questions. Most schooling is based on *extrinsic motivation*—on the idea that if we are sufficiently good at accumulating the necessary information to pass the exams, we will be rewarded in a postschool afterlife with a diploma, a good job, and a badge of good citizenship. Another brick in the wall. But passion emerges as we act on the sense of wonder, it drives the action of inquiry, to make sense of our condition, to learn and grow and understand, and to be enchanted by the very process itself. Creativity is motivated *intrinsically*, by the love for what we do (Amabile, 1996). I want to suggest that along with a passion for a specific subject we wish to learn about, there is also a love of inquiry, which I see as very closely connected with the love of life itself.

In that passion, there is always a *hope* that understanding can make a difference, and that this difference will make a difference (Freire, 2000). What *kind* of difference is itself a question of tremendous importance, of course. Friendship, romantic relationships, give us hope, hope of a better life, of deeper connection, deeper participation in life. In “Hearts and Bones,” Paul Simon sang that “the thought life can be better is woven indelibly into our hearts and our bones.” If this is so, then inquiry must also direct itself towards a vision and a practice of what that better life looks like, particularly in this age where, in the words of Edgar Morin (Morin & Kern, 1999), there is a “crisis of the future,” a real struggle to think about the future in a coherent way, and follow Von Foerster’s invitation, to always act so as to increase possibilities (Von Foerster, 1990).

*Conviviality* is also a central part of creative inquiry. No matter how lonely writing and research may seem, inquiry always occurs with others, whether they are physically present or not, with predecessors in different times and spaces, with our friends and foes who have approached the subject we are interested in. Inquiry is increasingly conducted in research teams, and our inquiry is *always* conducted in a web of relationships, of connections with others who may inspire or upset or enthuse or repulse us with their actions. The web of relationships ties us both to culture and nature, and is not “outside” us but both in *and* out. The world we inquire into is also inside us, providing us with the very tools we use for our inquiry (language, logic, a community of inquirers, empathy, a body of knowledge . . .). Our history, our world, has shaped the way we inquire, and the way we inquire in turn shapes the way we understand and act in the world. Inquiry is a way of traveling along this web of connections, to explore the myriad relationships that connect us to the world and ultimately make up who we are.
Inquiry and Creativity

In the mid- to late 80s, I was going to graduate school in Monterey, California. As part of my research on cross-cultural psychology, racism and prejudice, I was immersing myself deeper and deeper in the research on creativity. I had turned to creativity not because of my music background but because I realized that the characteristics of the creative person, as outlined by creativity researcher Frank Barron (1969), were the exact opposite of those of the authoritarian person (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1982)—in other words, of individuals prone to prejudice, stereotyping, racism, and so on (Montuori, 2005). As I reviewed the characteristics of the creative person, such as independence of judgment, tolerance of ambiguity, complexity of outlook, and openness to experience, it became obvious to me that these were also the characteristics that Sarno had promoted in his classroom. Educational experiences could either promote or inhibit these characteristics. My experience had been that Sarno was the only teacher I knew who had actively promoted them. Most of the rest of my education—and any other educational process I had seen—inculcated precisely the opposite characteristics.

The characteristics of creative individuals should not be seen as traits that one either has or does not have. Rather, together they form a creative attitude that can be cultivated, developed, and encouraged. We can do this ourselves, as a process of self-inquiry and self-development. We can also do it by creating social systems—such as schools—that encourage the creative attitude in both teachers and students. In the case of tolerance of ambiguity, for example, we can monitor whether, faced with a problem or an ambiguous, uncertain phenomenon, we want to quickly find a solution, almost any solution, to avoid the potential anxiety and discomfort of having to deal with uncertainty, or whether we make an effort to explore possibilities, study the issue more deeply, whether we go beyond black-and-white thinking to engage a spectrum of possibilities. In the classroom, we can give students the thrill of discovering and making sense of the material for themselves, rather than simply presenting them with a pile of material to memorize, and where what’s right and what’s wrong has already been established.

Creative inquiry approaches the universe as itself a creative process, as science increasingly suggests. It starts with the assumption that being human is a creative process and that our participation in the world is likewise a creative process. If it doesn’t always feel that way, it’s because our experience of creativity is often inhibited in a variety of ways. As an analogy, Chinese medicine proposes that there is an energy flowing through the Universe and the human body, which it calls chi. When the body is healthy, chi flows freely. When chi is blocked, for whatever reason, an imbalance occurs, and we experience disease. In the same way, creativity is at all times available, but through mental habits, inhibiting social structures, emotional disturbances, peer pressure, and other strictures, the creative flow is blocked. In the process, we experience less joy, spontaneity, humor, openness, and gradually lose the ability to respond with novel adaptations to our environment.
By promoting a creative attitude, by encouraging the fundamental view that life is a creative process, we encourage the free flow of creative chi. Through creative inquiry, we knowers and participants in the world foster our creativity in terms of our Person, our ongoing process of self-creation, the Process of inquiry itself and the many ways it can be approached, the Product we create, and our Environment. Frank Barron, the great creativity researcher, spoke of the “cosmological motive,” that creative people have (Barron, 1995). This is what underlies creative inquiry—“the desire to create one’s own universe of meaning, personally defined” (Barron, 1995, p. 75) rather than to reproduce the existing universe, in a way that makes the individual yet another brick in the wall.

The Shadow Side of Creative Inquiry

If this creative inquiry is such a great and joyful process, how come we’re not doing more of it? Where’s the shadow side to all of this? The truth is that there is a shadow, and on many levels. Some we have already touched upon. For instance, creative inquiry involves risk, potential discomfort, anxiety. In a society and an educational system where we are rewarded for being knowledgeable and for having the answers, taking an attitude of inquiry rather than a position based on our conviction that we’re right can seem risky for any number of reasons.

Experientially, creativity can lead to discomfort. The psychologist Rollo May titled his book on creativity The Courage to Create (1975) for good reasons. Tolerating the ambiguity, which results from not immediately resolving a problem, but instead waiting to see if we can develop a creative approach, can be uncomfortable. Stepping into the world with a new idea, a new perspective, can lead to ridicule, marginalization, or worse.

It is only if we risk, if we work, even on the most mundane and seemingly trivial aspects of our task, if we stretch ourselves, if we plunge into uncertainty and ambiguity that we can experience this joy. If we avoid risk, settle for the certain, the given, and enjoy only small pleasures, the joy will not compare.

It is no surprise that the creative process is most often compared to childbirth, a process similarly ecstatic and, yet, often painful and uncomfortable (Barron, 1999). A classic model of the stages of creativity draws inspiration from the process of childbirth (Wallas, 1976). It begins with immersion, when we become familiar with our question; incubation, when we mull it around, live with it, tolerate the ambiguity, and refuse to settle for the “cheap and easy” answer; illumination, when it finally all comes together; and verification, when we make sure our brilliant idea is worth a damn. The incubation period can be very uncomfortable. I’ve experienced it myself in the writing of this article. It took me a long time to put finger to keyboard, and I wrote the bulk of it in one evening. Before that, I felt uncomfortable, irritable, confused; I stalled. . . .

The creative process, understood broadly as bringing something new into existence,
does share characteristics with childbirth regardless of the more or less exalted qualities of the final product.

Once we move into the area of real joy, we also start experiencing some of the paradoxes of more complex phenomena. The joy of creative inquiry, as in any real joy, doesn’t come easy. It requires hard work and psychological risk. What is often forgotten is that an enormous amount of craft and critical thinking goes into the process of creation. The popular mythology about creativity has it that brilliant insights—even fully formed works of art—emerge suddenly like Athena from Zeus’s head. In fact, there is a whole romantic mythology about the genius without learning (Montuori & Purser, 1995). Creativity and genius are, in this view, innate gifts that do not require mundane toil. Although it may be true that in the illumination phase the creative process appears deeply mysterious and sometimes mystical, to get to that level of inspiration, we need deep immersion into our subject matter, the development of real craft, the ability to explore, think, investigate, and then, after the illumination, to engage the process of verification. Not only does creativity inevitably require the hard work of developing one’s craft, it also requires us to be able to critically assess our ideas, selecting only those that meet our stringent criteria.

So, if creativity is really associated with joy, do we still need to integrate seemingly harsh and painful and critical, not to mention mundane and “left-brained,” dimensions? Unquestionably, yes! Working as a record producer, most recently with my wife, a noted jazz artist, there’s always a time in the recording studio when we have to assess which take of a vocal or a particular solo or performance will become the one that makes it on the CD. Different performances have different qualities, and it’s not uncommon that one can become enthralled by several different performances of the same song. How to choose? What criteria to use? Whatever the final decision, the reality of making choices, having and applying criteria, and thinking critically and aesthetically plays a central role in any creative process that goes beyond mere self-expression and wishes to communicate to an audience.

One of the key characteristics of creativity, one that applies to the person, product, and process, is that it involves bringing together to perspectives or characteristics that are seemingly opposed—divergence and convergence, order and disorder, risk and safety, boredom and anxiety. A choice for one at the expense of the other will more often than not lead to the rigidity of a static position, lacking the flexibility of movement, process, and flow. Speaking of flow, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has of course developed the concept of flow to describe a peak performance state, characterized by a sense of well-being, purpose, and joy. When we are engaged in an activity that is on the knife’s edge between boredom (too easy) and anxiety (too difficult) and we are completely absorbed in the work, we experience this powerful, life-affirming feeling. I believe the best kinds of inquiry are characterized by precisely this experience of flow, of challenging ourselves and riding on the wave of the paradox of boredom and anxiety, order and disorder, innovation and tradition.
Images of Inquiry

The old-fashioned image of the “inquirer” in academia used to be the tweedy professor, all up in his head, out of touch with his feelings, and completely oblivious to his body. In the old days, he might have been pictured with a cigarette as a constant companion, a little snowdrift of dandruff, and a tendency to be utterly removed from the “realities” of everyday life. But is this the only possible image of an inquirer in an academic context? Clearly not. In my own experience, and seeing the excitement of colleagues and students engaged in passionate inquiry, I’ve seen any number of other images embodied that are frankly sexier, more engaging, and simply more joyful and creative. Most of my students hate the generic tweedy old geezer, it seems. He represents all that is dry, stuffy, and irrelevant.

Not surprisingly, when I ask students to name creative individuals and creative professions, very few, if any, refer to academics or intellectuals, unless it’s the occasional Einstein, who seems to be in a category all of his own. Tellingly, he is not associated with academia in the popular mind, but with the lone, misunderstood genius in the Swiss patent office. The interesting thing is that the image of the tweedy professor has clearly faded, not least because women are engaging in academic inquiry in greater numbers than men. But it’s unclear exactly what the new image(s) of the inquirer will be, particularly in an academic context. Is it going to be a customer-oriented knowledge worker who delivers what the student wants to hear so as to get good student evaluations? Or can we draw on some of the images that, for me at least, are far more exciting and motivating?

I would like to conclude by briefly sketching just a few of some of the possible new images, while pointing out that it is possible to be all of them—to see all of them as inspiration, roles one can take on, not unlike a Sybil of inquiry. The images include the detective or investigator, the lover, the jazz musician, and the spiritual seeker.

One obvious image of the detective is Sherlock Holmes. His intuition and intellect, remarkable powers of observation and extreme attentiveness to clues, constant connection making, and relentless search for the culprit, make him a thrilling, if somewhat tweaked, inquirer. Sherlock Holmes is certainly an intrepid inquirer and carries with him a mystique about the process of inquiry itself. Sometimes, there is indeed a feeling that, confronted with a perplexing puzzle, inquiry feels like sleuthing, investigating, trying to put the pieces of a puzzle together to understand what happened. Of course, we can substitute any investigator for Holmes—from Inspector Columbo to Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe to Miss Marple to Scully and Mulder from the X-Files, to Helen Mirren’s Jane Tennison in Prime Suspect, all with their different sleuthing styles. Inquiry is investigation, with the collection of clues, interviews, the reliance on hunches, intuitions, and inspired guesswork. Watson and Crick searching for clues in their work that led up to the discovery of DNA, Schliemann or Gimbutas finding and deciphering ancient cultures, but also
a student exploring what for him or her is uncharted territory coming across clues with a serendipitous discovery of a forgotten article, an insight that appears in a dream (like Kekule’s dream of a Uroboros that led to the discovery of the benzene ring), all of this points to an experience of investigation, of a treasure hunt, of a process of putting together the pieces of a puzzle that perhaps in the beginning, makes little or no sense.

Inquiry can be like a love affair, and the inquirer like a lover. Our passion for our subject can drive us to near-obsession, with a deep desire to understand the beloved, to be with her or him, to explore every nook and cranny of body and soul. Inquiry can be passionate, overwhelming. In (auto-)biographical accounts of inquiry by scientists and philosophers and writers, there are numerous stories of staying up all night, of being teased by subtle but ambiguous clues, of feeling seduced and rejected, of breakups and temporary separations followed by hurried reconciliations. Love may not always be easy, but it’s a powerful force.

We want to know the objects of our affection, know their deepest feelings and desires, learn about what makes them happy, where they came from, how they appeared in our lives. And it is when inquiry ceases in relationships, when we think we know our partner, and subsequently start taking her or him for granted, that we know the relationship is starting to go in the wrong direction. In some ways, love is inquiry, at a deep feeling level, understanding who “we” are, who “we,” this new entity, can be . . .

And love, as the research of social psychologists Elaine and Art Aron (1986) have shown, leads to an expansion of the self: people in love tend to write more, and more about themselves, than people who are not in love. We become more as we fall in love; we draw on more of our potential, more of who we can be. We are motivated, indeed driven, to pursue the object of our affection, and in the process, draw on more and more of ourselves. Lovers may sing and write poetry and find ways to express themselves to their beloved, even if they have no history of involvements in these arts previous to this outburst. Inquirers similarly dig deep and draw on all their resources to understand the subject of their undivided attention.

I also like to think of the inquirer as a jazz musician, improvising over the main themes and form of a song, dialoguing with other band members, throwing ideas back and forth, being spurred on to greater insights and creativity by the excitement of the dialogue, alternating supporting and soloing roles, going into uncharted territory as they take a well-known song like My Funny Valentine and make it their own by finding new meanings, new possibilities, new potentials in it. Here, the process is the product; the collective improvisation that arouses the minds of passionate inquirers is itself a motivator and a desirable “product” that renews our faith in conviviality.

The collaborative, convivial dimension of inquiry, being a part of a community of like-minded people, can be a source of enormous joy. Another image for inquiry is friendship.

When I first came to the United States, like so many other students, I spent hours knocking back espressos and talking about all the exciting new ideas we were being
exposed to. Twenty-three years later, I still relish the long walks on the beach at Monterey with my close friend John Lyons, dialoguing not only about the subject matter of our studies but about the effect this whole inquiry (and our educational experience as a whole) is having on us, about our experience of the way we were changing, growing, struggling, how we were becoming different persons, seeing the world differently, sharing our passionate interests, and tentatively exploring what our hopes and aspirations were once we inevitably left the idyllic setting of Monterey. There is, of course, a whole mythology—associated with places like Paris, the Village in New York, and North Beach in San Francisco, and generally fueled by coffee and other liquid delights—about groups getting together to explore ideas, debate them, make outrageous statements, and generally play with ideas. Interestingly, it has only been quite recently that creative collaborations have become the subject of attention and serious study (Montuori & Purser, 1999).

Finally, we can envision the process of inquiry as a spiritual practice, and a spiritual path—a way, in other words, to gain a deeper understanding of who we are, and indeed the limitations we have placed on our understanding of “self.” And this practice is not confined to the at times seemingly mystical moments of insight and illumination. If anything, it is more appropriate to such mundane struggles as ordering the endless references required for articles published in academic literature, copyediting, and checking the formatting. The entire process of inquiry can become an opportunity to dwell in a sacred space.

Inquiry can connect us with our source of inspiration, with our creativity, our sense of mission and ways of being and knowing that constantly open up possibilities and opportunities. To know the world we must know ourselves, and to know ourselves we must know the world. How is our relationship with the world reflected in inquiry? What do the subject of our inquiry and the way in which we inquire tell us about ourselves? What values do we embody in our search? To what extent can we allow our creativity to flow freely, and to what extent is our creativity constricted and blocked? Inquiry can fold back on itself, and every inquiry can become a self-inquiry.

Every inquiry is conducted by an inquirer, and that inquirer brings herself or himself to bear on the process in many complex ways. If we set aside the belief that we can avoid “tainting” our inquiry’s objectivity with the “subjectivity” of the inquirer, then the primary challenge becomes not “bracketing” the inquirer’s beliefs and assumptions but making them transparent. Inquiry becomes self-inquiry, and the process takes on a different, more circular and self-reflective form, and the inquirer also becomes the subject of (self-)inquiry.

So many factors come into play when we begin an inquiry. Our cultural and social background, as well as our values and beliefs, influence the way we approach an issue. Our psychological characteristics influence the way in which we approach and engage the creative process, as we come across the emotions elicited by our engagement in our work, with authors and ideas we admire or dislike, the dialogues and debates as we share viewpoints with colleagues. We can step back and see how our
very approach to an inquiry is shaped and conditioned by a variety of factors that both enable us to “get a grip” on the subject and limit us, particularly if we are unaware of the nature of the constraints. This is all grist for the mill as we reflect on our process and seek to gain a better understanding of the constraints and possibilities that emerge through inquiry. Inquiry offers an opportunity to access our creative abilities, and through the creation of our work we develop not only our ideas, but also our voice, our identity in the context of the dialogue we are participating in. It is not unusual to find that as we work we literally “externalize” dimensions of ourselves. As our work emerges and we “put it out there,” we can see it, study it, and, in the case of an article or a painting or a piece of music, we can revise it, edit it, change it, but also gain insight into its source and what it says about who we are.

Who is “the writer?” Who is writing? To what extent is the writing process influenced by egoic concerns, by wanting to “look good,” appear wise, insightful, by crushing opponents, by defeating other views? Who are we as we step into dialogue with a community of fellow inquirers? Do we feel intimidated, do we feel righteous anger, a desire to expand the discourse, to make a contribution? What motivates our inquiry? The possibility of a good grade, a promotion, a contribution, a passion to make a positive difference? Can we get out of our own way enough to let some of the creativity flow through us? Do we want to be right? How do we walk the talk of inquiry? How do we interact with others as we engage the process? How does the knowledge we gather along the way inform the way we lead our lives?

Inquiry is an opportunity to access our highest potentials, to go beyond what we have thought, felt, and been before. Inquiry arguably offers us the possibility to “get out of our own way,” and let our creativity flow through us, as we let go of some of our egoic attachments and petty concerns. As we work, we also work on ourselves; as we learn, we learn about the learner.

This is just one small set of the images that provides a different view of inquiry, opening up new possibilities and perspectives. The point is not so much to promote one image over another, but simply to suggest that it is not just possible but arguably necessary to both investigate our existing image, our “implicit assumptions” about inquiry and the inquirer, and explore new possibilities.

**Conclusion**

As I hope to have made clear in these pages, my belief is that we can engage in creative inquiry and that joy is a central aspect of creative inquiry. It is not a simplistic joy but a complex joy that arises out of the awareness that inquiry implies mystery and the unknown, that outcomes are uncertain, that for us to experience joy in inquiry we must also be willing to “eat bitter,” as the Chinese say, and that we must be both rigorous and imaginative to be creative. But the rewards are I believe well worth it . . .
References


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