



The Siren's Song



The beggar noticed that the setting sun was approaching the horizon.

"After confronting the dragon, I felt empowered. I felt free to continue on my journey thinking that nothing could be as scary as a fire-breathing dragon."

"So it was smooth sailing from then on?" asked the laborer. "No other work to be done?"

"Far from it!" replied the beggar. "The majority of my trials and tribulations occurred after my encounter with the dragon. Once I rid myself of all the pickles and doughnuts my boat became lighter. This meant that I began to travel faster west. I had to battle pirates, fierce sea creatures, and vultures. In the process, I had to break off a sharp piece of my boat and use it as a weapon to defend myself. With it, I was able to slice, dice, chop, and toss away what things crossed my path."

"What a grueling experience," said the farmer.

"It was indeed, and I became very tired as a result. But I found that I performed best when I treated it with an explorer's gusto—when I thought less about where I wanted to end up and simply enjoyed this grand adventure I was having away from the island. I was always reenergized when I approached my ordeals in this way—in my own explorer way."

The village drunk then began to babble, barely coherent. "I've lived a life that's full. I've traveled each and every highway."

"Hush," replied the chef.

"Stop your playing around, drunk," added the religious person, "and let the beggar finish."

The Power of Thinking Differently

While the villagers were dismayed by the apparent lack of respect, the beggar enjoyed the sporadic outburst. "Actually, it was when I didn't approach my exploits *my way*—with the soul of a true explorer—that I found myself off course."

The villagers turned their attention away from the drunk and back solely onto the beggar.

"As I was battling my foes, I heard a beautiful voice from across the sea. It was a sweet, soprano tone that seemed to linger in the air just long enough for me to catch it before being swept away by the wind. I became entranced by it. So much so, that I soon realized I had drifted off course and away from the creatures that had blocked my path west."

The villagers' eyes began to wander as if trying to listen to the sounds of the dusk wind as it brushed by their ears.

"What was it saying?" asked the doughnut maker.

"I couldn't tell at first. But, as I continued heading away from the sun's path, I found myself face to face with a gorgeous, young siren in a long, blue silk gown and long, flowing golden hair."

The male villagers' eyes widened, while the female villagers rolled theirs.

"And she hovered in the sky, above my boat. She was close enough for me to hear her words, but too far to touch."

"What was she saying?" asked the chef.

"Well, that was the odd thing. She wasn't saying anything. She was singing. And, as if overcome by a spell, I fell to my knees and listened ...

I've heard the news
You're looking around
For hidden treasure
That can't be found.

Your fight with vultures
Will lead nowhere
Sea creatures will continue
To attack and scare.

The winds will blow
Until you wreck.
And then the pirates
Will board your deck.

They say the island's the limit
And to me that's really true.
Go back to pickles and doughnuts
Don't see this journey through.

Because you're bad. You're bad.
Rea—Ily bad.
You know you're not good. You're bad.
You know it.

The whole world's gonna answer with a song
To tell you over and over again.
You're bad.

"What a horrific song!" yelled out the doughnut maker.

"You must have been condemned!" cried the religious person.

The laborer shouted, "That must have been some sort of war chant!"

"No!" exclaimed the beggar. "It was not a condemnation or war chant. The siren was trying to censor my activities. You must understand that it is a very arduous path toward the treasure. The siren was simply trying to keep me safe in her own unique way."

The villagers paused to reflect on the beggar's words.

"It sounds like you were kept safe, at least temporarily."

"You had a reprieve from the obstacles at sea."

"And you were privy to the sounds of a beautiful voice."

"Not to mention the sight of a beautiful young lady."

The beggar nodded in agreement. "Yes. Those are all true. But I did not cross the dangerous pit, set sail on a boat, confront a fire-breathing dragon, battle pirates, sea creatures, and vultures simply to encounter an enchantress. I had veered off course, and no matter

how entranced I was with the siren, I needed to break free of her spell."

The laborer jumped up into a fighting stance. "So did you pluck her from the sky and slay her with your weapon?"

The chef leaped up and added, "Did you slice her and dice her into tiny pieces?"

"And then," the doughnut maker asked enthusiastically, "did you toss her into the sea, like doughnut dough into hot, burning doughnut oil?"

"No!" the beggar exclaimed. "I did not pluck her, slay her, chop her, or toss her! What is wrong with you people? She wasn't a salad!"

The villagers looked at each other, perplexed by the beggar's response.

"What's a salad?" asked the religious person.

"Never mind that...I did no such vulgar acts like the ones you all have suggested."

"So what did you do?" asked the chef.

"I simply acknowledged her, thanked her for sharing her tune, and then I did my best to block out her voice. I had to sing my own song in order to filter out hers from my awareness. Only by doing this could I keep my focus on my travels west."

The laborer was curious. "What song did you sing?"

"Was it some spiritual hymn?" asked the religious person.

"Actually, I sang the following over and over again to myself..." and the beggar began to sing the poetic lyrics of the most marvelous song the villagers had ever heard.*

Then, at the end, he completed his performance with the most heart-felt words. "Sha na na na na na na, sha na na na na. Sha na na na na na na, sha na na na na."

The farmer began to applaud. "What a magical tune!"

"Only a sophisticated aria such as this could have possible countered the siren's mesmerizing serenade," said the religious person.

"Yes, and I was once again able to head west. Singing this song was the only way for me to once again become an explorer—to be

myself again, rather than a stagnant listener of that enchantress."

The villagers sat back down and looked at the beggar in amazement.

"For what's a man? What's he got? If not himself, then he has naught," spoke the beggar.

"True!" replied the villagers in unison.

"To say what he truly feels and not the drivel of one who kneels. History shows I took the blows," continued the beggar.

"Sea creatures, pirates, and vultures," the villagers all commented.

The beggar nodded in agreement. "Yes. And when push came to shove, I did it my way."



*As of the publication of this book, it was too expensive to pay for permission to reprint the lyrics to this song (yes, it is a real song). I encourage you to find them yourself online by searching for "Time to Change" performed by the Brady Bunch. I think you'll find it enlightening...or at least mildly amusing.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Not-So-Secret Secrets to Out-of-the-Box Thinking

Scenario 2: There is a carrot, a pile of pebbles, and a pipe lying together in the middle of a field. Why?

For some of you, this is the chapter you've been waiting for. You may have read the back cover, read the introduction, or attended one of my workshops and heard me speak of the "Secrets to Out-of-the-Box Thinking." In fact, you may have just ran across this book on the shelf of a bookstore and immediately jumped to this chapter wanting to know what The Secrets are.

I also know from my research that there are a number of you who are natural wizards at coming up with new ideas. You are the type that easily comes up with crazy notions and off-the-wall concepts, and maybe, your difficulty is turning them into a reality. This dilemma is addressed in the 6th aspect of the creative process. However, though the secrets of this 4th aspect may not seem so secret to you, I hope you'll find here a new way to envision how you come up with new ideas. And as we've already explored, new perspectives can often lead to even more creative insights.

Where did these creative thinking secrets come from?

These "Not-so-Secret" secrets to out-of-the-box thinking are the basic "techniques" and strategies that I have found most common in books on creative, out-of-the-box, and lateral thinking. Authors use different terms or write for specific audiences (writer, painter, businessperson, entrepreneur, inventor), and this can make them sound different. But I've done my best here to describe them in general enough terms to make them applicable to anyone—even good old

Uncle Max who seems stuck in his ways.

These secrets are the closet ways to be creative “on-demand.” These secrets allow you to actively participate in the story building needed to make sense out of life’s many conundrums, including the one that began this chapter.

Such issues call for optimal solutions and not absolute, calculable answers. They require us to reinterpret our initial perceptions of the scenario and of what is possible through the use of our creative faculties. And the solutions often occur as flashes of insight.

The secrets in this chapter are ways to access a larger breadth of ideas and are the beginning steps to becoming more “insight prone.”

The Secrets to Exploring New Ideas

Wait a minute. If creative insights and new ideas come as flashes from the unconscious, why do we have to actively try to do anything?

As Freud once said, “When inspiration does not come to me, I go halfway to meet it.”

You can think of this active process as warming up the mind for insight. All these activities engage our dominant ideas, our dominant patterns of thought, and try to loosen them. They also promote a mental environment where our unconscious can have more freedom to roam and where we can actually be in a state of mind to perceive its ruminations rather than block it by the over-activity of our conscious thoughts and common neural patterns.

To be more susceptible to experiencing creative insights it may be better to search in new streams rather than try to fish for them in our old ones.

Here we participate in creative play—making associations between new ideas—in order to not only come across insights (which our unconscious often does), but also to further weaken the barricades posted by our conditioned perceptions. We play around with new ideas or with altering old ones. It’s here that the artist doodles, the musician plays around with sounds, the inventor tinkers, and the scientist dreams of the hypothetical. As I like to say, the organization that brainstorms together goes beyond the norms together.

Such creative play is the meat of ingenuity and inventiveness. By

actively exploring like children, we can make ourselves more susceptible to the flashes of genius that can help us deal with the scenarios of our adult lives. It is through this type of exploration that you may have been led to the idea that the carrot, pebble, and pipe from scenario 2 were all remnants of a melted snowman.

There are numerous specific strategies for creative play in various different endeavors. There are specific activities that the painter, the engineer, the salesman, the financial analyst, the clothing designer, the photographer, the dancer, and the business group can participate in to loosen their minds and explore new ideas. But, for the most part, they all follow many of the basic approaches discussed below.

You were born with the faculties for creative play. So here are the secrets to helping you *remember* how to do just that.

Secret #1: Go with the Flow

Have you ever been wowed by a great jazz improviser, comedic improviser, or extemporaneous speaker? In jazz, virtuosos like Ella Fitzgerald, Bobby McFerrin, Charlie Parker, and Dizzy Gillespie wow the crowd with their extemporaneous outpouring of creativity. On the spot, they are able to improvise a melody that nobody has ever heard anywhere at anytime. The same is true of a comedy improvisation troupe that plays a "theater game" and—based upon random suggestions from the audience—creates novel scenes and dialogue on the spur of the moment.

For the audience listening and watching these improvisational performances, the quality of these extemporaneous performances can be mind-boggling and magical.

How can they come up with that out of thin air?

One short answer is that they all *went with the flow*.

Do you think such improvisational feats are beyond your abilities? If you said yes, guess again, and ask yourself this: when was the last time you caught yourself daydreaming? I won't be offended if you were daydreaming while reading this book. It would actually make me very happy.

Try to remember what that felt like. You started thinking about one thing, and that led you to another thing, which led you to another, and so on. Like being caught by the stream of a river, you were carried along a free flowing stream of ideas. Before you knew it, a simple thought

about tomorrow's board meeting led you to realize how amazing a glass of strawberry lemonade would taste right after making-out with your lover (I'll let you fill in the blanks on that one).

So what happened when I daydreamed?

When we daydream, we let go of needing to control our thoughts. We allowed one thought to naturally, organically lead us to another without consciously directing where they went.

Nancy Andreasen, neuroscientist and psychiatrist, noticed that much of our creative thoughts occurred this way: randomly, without our conscious direction. To understand the anatomy of these thoughts, Andreasen performed a study that used a PET scan to monitor blood flow to the brain. Under one condition, subjects consciously directed their thoughts by recalling the events of their day. In another, the subjects were asked to close their eyes and rest in the attempt to encourage less directed thoughts.

The results showed that during the rest condition almost all activity was located in the association cortex. If you recall, they are the folks in our brain's different "districts" whose only job is to communicate with other districts—like the person in the financial district whose sole job it is to communicate with the restaurant folks, the government folks, and so on. They are unspecialized and not pre-wired for anything other than being the bridge between our brain's different lobes.

What Andreasen's study indicates is that the association cortex plays an important part not only in the integration of information between brain regions, but also in producing a good amount of the activity often associated with the unconscious mind. She goes on to make the following observations:

It is as if the multiple association cortices are communicating back and forth...simply in response to one another. These associations are occurring freely. They are running unchecked.... Initially these associations may seem meaningless or unconnected.... Out of this disorganization, self-organization eventually emerges and takes over in the brain. The result is a completely new and original thing: a mathematical function, a symphony, or a poem.¹

To increase the activity of the association cortex, Andreasen

suggests the use of free association thinking. It is what occurs when you daydream. You simply let your mind wander and see what ideas and notions float into your awareness. As they come in, you allow them to lead you to other ideas and then to others. Your thoughts are meant to come in undirected without your consciousness stirring them in toward particular places. Also, your thinking must be open-ended without a predetermined end point. By exercising undirected, open-ended thinking, we may be able to form new associations and be privy to more creative insights.

For example, during a great jazz improvisation, the improviser hears what the band is playing, which leads her to start performing the first few notes of a new melody, and the constant interaction inspires her further. The same goes for the comedic improviser.

Are you saying we should daydream to be creative?

To think creatively, we need to daydream about our ideas, perceptions, and concepts playfully without any goal in mind. Become an observer. Try not to participate by controlling the movement of your thoughts. This is one of the reasons brainstorming can be useful because we have no control over what somebody else is going to say. The idea with brainstorming is to generate as many ideas as possible. So the focus is on quantity as opposed to quality. In other words, we want to have access to as diverse an intersection of ideas as possible.

In order to do this, we need to let go of the need to be critical and instead embrace all ideas, especially uncommon ones. For instance, in all of the above examples, the participants must "play off" of the current ideas. If you're free-associating by yourself, you take your current idea, accept it, and play off of it without question. If you're free-associating with others (brainstorming, jazz improvisation, theater improvisation), you play off of each other's ideas without denying them. In fact, this a major commandment of theater improvisation:

Thou shall not negate other people's statements. Just add on to them.

In short: Agree. Accept. Add.
Imagine you're asked to improvise a scene about being out with a friend on a Sunday afternoon. Your fellow actor begins by saying, "Hey Sarah, isn't it great being out here hiking in the woods?"

And you respond: "Woods? What woods? We're in a bowling alley?"

That's a sure fire way of becoming the most hated actor in your troupe. You stopped the scene before it really even started. If the two of you just kept negating each other, the scene would never get the chance to develop, and the improvised story would never go anywhere.

So the principle behind going with the flow is to allow your thoughts to take you to places without your active participation. The first idea or thought that comes up may not be the solution to your problem. However, if left alone it may inspire or lead you to another idea which could lead to a third one and so on until you stumble upon your 'aha' moment. The initial idea may only be the first step on a lateral path to an invaluable insight.

Secret #2: Mix & Match—Combinatory Play

"Step into the stream." That's another way of making yourself more flexible to new ideas. Randomly explore new combinations of 'old' ideas, perceptions, and concepts. Einstein was able to arrive at so many unique ideas concerning the nature of the universe by such combinatory play.

And just like Einstein, you participate in combinatory play anytime you mix and match your furniture, dishes for dinner (pasta and apple pie), and items on your desk at work. You participate in combinatory play every time you mix and match your clothes and accessories.

Whenever you mix and match anything, you are like Einstein. But don't let that get to your head.

Here are a couple more examples of rather well known mix and matches.

- Abstract expressionist painters participated in combinatory play when they used house paint brushes, basting syringes, and trowels to create works of art. Further, they experimented with drips, splatters, and accidental marks by throwing and squirting paint, not very conventional ways of creating a painting.²
- The results of combinatory play need not be so abstract. The British rock band Queen combined rock-and-roll with opera

- and produced the hit song *Bohemian Rhapsody*.
- Author Bernard Malamud combined baseball with the quest for the Holy Grail and created the novel and movie *The Natural*.

But what if I can't think of any new mixes and matches?

Instead of waiting for these sorts of unique associations to present themselves, you can also intentionally rearrange the associations of *what you already know*. For instance, if you're looking to improve a process or a plan, you can write out all the steps of your current process and try rearranging them.

- A company can look at their production flow and rearrange the order of the process.
- An entrepreneur can look at the typical chain of events that occurs when buying a burrito and decide she could be more efficient by changing the order around (Chipotle anyone?).
- A painter can rearrange the colors and shapes of an earlier work to create something new.
- A screenwriter can decide to start their movie at the middle or end of their story and end the movie at its beginning.
- Or a musician can take a melody and rearrange the order that she plays the notes.

In other words, you take the chain of ideas associated with whatever you're looking to change, and then, just rearrange the chains. You'll definitely arrive at some interesting ideas that may or may not be useful, but they could possibly inspire you and open up paths towards ones that are.

The idea is to simply allow yourself to *play* around with unconventional idea combinations for the sake of exploration and not because you feel the need to arrive at a destination.

Secret #3: Random Stimulation

If you're still having trouble exciting creative neural networks, you can let the external world excite them for you. You can do this through a technique called *random stimulation*. I know to some it sounds like another of my double entendres, but I can't take credit for this one. It

really is a term frequently found in creative thinking circles. So there is no need to be afraid. It's safe, easy, and you don't have to feel guilty about it afterwards.

What is random stimulation?

Here's the scoop: have you ever had an idea just come to you out of the blue based on something somebody else said or something that quickly caught your eye? Well, you're not alone. And as it turns out, many creative individuals make this sort of random stimulation a part of their creative process.

- George Harrison decided he would write a song based on the first book he saw at his mother's house. At random, he picked a book and found the phrase "gently weeps." He would go on to quickly write the popular Beatles song *While My Guitar Gently Weeps*.
- Edgar Allan Poe also used random stimulation strategies. For example, to come up with a plot for his next tale, he would randomly pick words out of the dictionary and attempt to associate them into a story. If an idea struck him, he would begin writing, and if not, he would simply find a new batch of words.

Random stimulation is the engine that drives many comedy improvisational games. Here, the theater troupe calls upon the audience to provide random suggestions that form the basis of their game. For instance, my comedy troupe often plays a game called *Mr. Wikipedia*. While on stage, we solicit "tough" questions from the audience that we will attempt to answer as one "mind"—i.e., as Mr. Wikipedia.

Here's how the game works. First, we decide on the order that each of us will speak. And when it comes time to answer the question, each member of the troupe speaks in that order, adding one word at a time to the answer until a sentence is formed. So let's say, Tom, Becky (fictitious names to protect the innocent), and I receive a quirky question from the audience such as, "Where can I find a leprechaun?"

This is what may occur...

Javy: You

Tom: can

Becky: find

Javy: leprechauns

Tom: in

Becky: Kenny

Javy: Rogers

Tom: beard!

Not only are we soliciting random stimulation from the audience, but each troupe member must respond to random stimulation from the troupe member who spoke before them, like when brainstorming. We may not always be funny, and frequently aren't, but it almost always generates a unique association of ideas.

How can I apply random stimulation to my creative endeavors?

You can apply random stimulation in various different ways depending on your endeavor. The creative entrepreneur may sit at a coffee shop and listen to random conversations to discover what inconveniences could be helped by a new product or service. The visual artist may blindly pick out a color from a box of crayons. The unhappy employee may randomly walk around town or browse through a random magazine to find inspiration for a new career. You could roll a pair of dice, pick a card from a deck, peruse a museum, invite input from random people, or throw darts at a poster or a map. Random inspiration can come from anywhere and from anything.

If you haven't already noticed, it's really just free-associating. But instead of doing it by yourself or within a particular group, you're free-associating with *anything* you choose. You can free-associate with the world at large.

So when you feel as if your internal well is dry, an unlimited supply of random stimulation awaits you in the external world.

Secret #4: Expand Representations through Reframing

We saw in Chapter 3 how our perceptions are often shaped by the way information is framed. For instance, the phrases *93% survival rate* and *7% mortality rate* convey the same facts but elicit very different responses.

For this reason, like a home buyer who stops by a potential home at different times of the day or an interior designer who looks at their decorations while varying the room's luminosity, you'll often find it

useful to reframe a scenario in order to see it in a different light.

Change Your Modes of Thinking

One way to reframe a perspective is to change the mode in which you are experiencing it. For instance, if you are thinking about a scenario in words or equations, you may want to try visualizing it instead. Rather than thinking about the nature of light in terms of scientific language or mathematical equations, Einstein arrived at his insights by visualizing riding a light beam through space.

When I taught high school music, one of the most difficult things to do was teach an ensemble how to play soft, or *pianissimo*. It was often useful to provide them with a visual representation, where I would use the distance between my hands to express dynamics. It also helped to have them think of dynamics as a scale from 1 to 10 so they could envision where *pianissimo* was relationally rather than rely on an abstract cry of "play soft!"

Analogy and Metaphor

A direct way to reframe a perspective is to rephrase it through an analogy. An analogy allows you to present what you know in an alternate language allowing you to think through your knowledge. It could be envisioning your wealth as a plant that you need to grow, or seeing the invention you are working on as a baby you are caring for, or thinking of creativity as a heroic journey. It could also be thinking of your employees as team members or envisioning a social problem as an economic one.

As I have been advocating throughout this book, trying to see your scenario in different terms may expose new associations of ideas, new choices to explore, or new approaches to your endeavor. By perceiving your portfolio like a plant, you may finally see that building wealth requires time, nurturing, and constant feeding. By thinking of your employees as team members, you may find their dissenting ideas as valuable as their manpower and that morale improves performance.

Choreographer Twyla Tharp has even used coins to represent her dancers, tossing the coins in the air and using the resulting patterns to inspire her dance formations. This is an example of combining the reframing of a problem with random stimulation for ideas.

The effectiveness of reframing is one of the reasons why teaching

tales and metaphors are such an effective education tool. Using literal, declarative statements usually trigger our dominant perceptions. Through an analogy, we can see things *as if*. Investigating our scenarios through the terms of a metaphor may not trigger our dominant perceptions and reactions so quickly. This then helps us avoid the limitations of our habitual pattern recognition. We can then deepen the meaning of what we are learning, often through the new imagery provided by the metaphor.

For example, when your mother tells you that life is unpredictable, you may have a particular literal understanding of those words. And it may be that she's told you this so often that you have grown numb to it, unable to get any more value from her words. But you may be privy to a new perception when she tells you that life is like a box of chocolates—i.e., it can be bitter, sweet, crunchy, soft, or pure ecstasy. *You never know what you're gonna get.*

In order to find creative approaches to your art, business, or life, you can try replacing the lens through which you perceive these things. You could try to find a new story with which to make sense out of your experience. By doing so, new connections between ideas can appear that were not obvious through the old lens of perception.

Secret #5: Being a Little Nutty

This secret is short, sweet, and all about attitude.

Deviating from normal thinking processes requires us to be unafraid of being weird, unusual, or a bit nutty. We need to go beyond our ideas of normalcy in order to explore novel possibilities. Imagine yourself as the mad scientist with crazy hair, like Doc Brown from the movie *Back To The Future*.

This secret is all about how you approach this stage of your creative endeavor. Be aware of your mindset and personality here. Are you serious? Are you uptight? Are you grumpy? Or are you loose and free, without a care in the world, willing to try anything once?

Why can it be hard for some people to be a little nutty?

The difficulty is that we often live our lives trying to maintain a certain persona. Whether we are aware of it or not, we wear masks in different environments, amongst different groups of people in order to fit in. You can simply reflect on how you and your coworkers behave

in the office versus how you might behave in front of your children versus how you might behave when amongst your old school friends. For us adults, we often spend a majority of our time behind a mask of seriousness or one of proper behavior—whatever that might mean. We can get so used to wearing these masks that it can become very difficult to embody a screwball attitude.

This is why in group settings, it may be beneficial to have at least one person who isn't afraid to be wild with their input, throwing in ideas from *left field*. If quantity of ideas is what we are after in this stage, then a wacky approach to the scenario, project, or problem may just be what is needed. It isn't so much that you're relying on them for the creative insight you're after, but that their off the wall ideas may inspire others.

This means you should embrace having a designated oddball, off the wall, crazy Uncle Charlie voice in your group. Better yet, it means appreciating having a little crazy Uncle Charlie in you.

Secret # 6: Don't Worry, Be Happy

Try to bring to mind a moment when you were upset, angry, or depressed.

If you're having trouble, perhaps you can try to recall what your thoughts were like when you were cut off on the freeway, were criticized by your boss, or when you ended a relationship.

Were you preoccupied with your sadness or anger? Did it consume you? It can often be hard to let these emotions go. We often have a tendency to hold onto them, and consequently, we tend to hold onto whatever picture of the world supports those emotions.

Aren't the best artists the ones who are in deep pain?

The "creative type" is often imagined to be the person who seems to live their life in this sort of eternal agony or despair. There are numerous examples of the creative artist who are inspired by their misery or use it as fuel, including songwriters, novelists such as Earnest Hemingway, and a plethora of poets including Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson.

However, rather than thinking of negative emotion as the common trait among artists, it may be more accurate to say that emotionality can be great creative fodder in general, whether it be the anger inspired lyrics of a woman scorned or the painting or poetry of a lover who has

fallen head over heels in love.

In general though, studies indicate that creativity does indeed favor more positive states of mind. Feelings of joy and love appear to have a much more positive effect on creative output than do feelings of fear, anger, or sadness.³

The reason, as you've probably already guessed, is pretty simple. When we are unhappy, we often get stuck or fixated on our issues. We see the world as constricting. We inherently narrow our focus onto limited possibilities. On the other hand, the happier we are, the more open we are to seeing the world as one full of potential and promise. It is this vision that provides the motivation for our optimism.

It is this optimism that can fuel our need to enter and explore the sea of possibilities.

Secret #7: Establish an Exploratory Environment

Sometimes, creative ideas emerge when we are surrounded by inspirational art, music, or by nature through random stimulation.

At other times, we can arrive at creative ideas by being in a nice quiet space without visual distractions, allowing for flashes of creative insights. We'll discuss this in the 5th aspect.

Further, our earlier observations of the creative landscape showed us that we could actively pursue creative ideas by immersing ourselves in a diversity of perceptions giving us access to a wider pool of ideas. We can then be in a better position to challenge assumptions, rearrange associations, or find new analogies. Our free association can then span an even greater breadth. In other words, we can have a larger net to cast in the sea of possibilities.

What's the easiest way to diversify my perceptions?

The quickest way to do this is by immersing ourselves in an environment of diverse individuals. Yet, as anyone who has ever been in any sort of meeting knows, just having diverse individuals doesn't guarantee creative ideas. Instead, it often means a lot of disagreeing, a lot of head shaking, a lot of sighing, and a lot of clock watching.

Luckily, a lot of people, smarter than I, have done research to help us all foster creative groups. Based on this research, here are some key tactics for enhancing group creativity.

The 5 Keys to Unlocking Creativity in Groups

1. Focus on creative environments, not creative people.

A common perception about creative groups is that, in order to be successful, it needs to be filled with creative people. But, as I've been emphasizing, we are all creative. The problem is giving people the freedom and support to exercise it in front of others. In one case, innovative groups were studied to see what the critical factors were for their improvisational capabilities.⁴ Rather than individual creative spontaneity, it was the quality of relationship between the group members that emerged as the key factor.

2. Develop trust and comfort.

Oftentimes, when we participate in group projects, we can find ourselves worrying so about how we come across to others that we are unable to relax and simply play around with ideas. What we need to have is trust that our crazy ideas will be appreciated before they are judged. We need to have trust that our group members aren't going to call us names or ridicule us. With this trust and comfort, we can relax enough to simply play around with ideas.

3. Agree. Accept. Add.

In studies that look at brainstorming in groups, the biggest obstacle to creativity seems not to be the lack of creativity or creative individuals, but self-censorship. While many brainstorming courses expertly teach techniques for arriving at unique ideas, brainstorming and other similar group strategies are much more affected by individual psychology. One way to address this is to prepare individuals for the possible negative feedback that they may receive. However, it can also be addressed by limiting the feedback received.⁵

It may just be best to stick with the theater improvisation rule: Agree. Accept. Add.

4. Not I, but We.

This also implies then that it may be beneficial to remove any reward for "coming up" with creative ideas in group brainstorming sessions. A look at several creative companies, such as IDEO, reveals that it can be helpful to shift focus from the individual to the collective.⁶ Rather than think of a creative idea as having originated from a specific individual,

within group settings, it may be best to think of the idea as the result of a group process of which the individual is a member. It's only fair since the idea of brainstorming is that ideas from one person can help inspire ideas in the next. So truly, they are the result of a collaborative process and not the lone genius.

5. Creative leadership = cultivator of creative environments.

It is for this reason that group facilitators, or managers, shouldn't carry the burden of being the originator of creative ideas but be the caretaker of creative space. During a two-day colloquium of leading scholars and executives from companies, such as Google, IDEO, Novaris, Intuit and E Link, creativity researchers Teresa Amabile and Mukti Khaire concluded that leaders should be responsible for encouraging ideas and cultivating an environment for creativity rather than necessarily being the source of ideas.⁷ Likewise, research indicates that group creativity is much less about managing creative individuals and more about providing the right social context and cultivating creative interactions.⁸

Overwhelmed by the Sea of Possibilities

You've done it. You are now part of the select fraternity of individuals that hold the seven secrets to out-of-the-box thinking. You're an official Secret Keeper.*

Now, you're ready to start your conquest of the creative underworld!

What do I do when I find myself overwhelmed by the field of possibilities? It can seem so endless that I don't know where to start or how to jump into the creative intersection.

That can be a problem.

Well, here's where constraints may be helpful. You can arbitrarily set constraints on your exploration to give yourself boundaries to play within. It's like telling somebody, "Go paint!" If that's all the instruction given, one can be overwhelmed with all the possibilities of what that can mean: *Paint what? Paint where?* The same is true for trying to find a new business idea, writing a new poem, or tackling homelessness. For

*I don't think that's related to an inn keeper or a goal keeper in soccer, but it's empowering just the same.

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our painting example, the painter can set boundaries, such as limiting themselves to a particular canvas and paint set. The poet can constrain themselves to a particular topic, to a certain number of lines, or to a particular meter.

Oftentimes, the boundaries are inherent in your endeavor. You may have a limited budget with which to address homelessness in your community. Or maybe, you wish to find people shelter before wintertime, so you inherently have a timeline to think of a creative solution.

So when you're frozen, stuck, and staring in awe at all the possible directions in which you can steer your ship, start your exploration by simply choosing a certain area of the sea.

Wow. So I guess I am ready to begin my creative conquests.

Yes. But a word of caution, if you're new to all of this, there's a good possibility that some of your creative muscles have atrophied from lack of use. It may be good to exercise them into shape.

Take a look at the next chapter to find out how.