

The legendary modern dance pioneer explains
the links between imagination, luck and hard work.

Thought Leader Interview:

Twyla Tharp

by Karen Christensen

You have said that “In order to be creative, you have to know how to prepare to be creative.” Please explain.


Being creative is a full-time job, with its own daily patterns. Think about it this way: we stretch before we jog, we practice the violin before we play – and it’s no different for our minds. Anyone who has been successful in a creative profession has their own routine for preparing for their work, whether it’s a painter finding his way each morning to the easel, or a medical researcher returning daily to the laboratory. The routine is as much a part of the creative process as the lightning bolt of inspiration – maybe more. **Igor Stravinski** always did the same thing each morning when he entered his studio: he sat at the piano and played a **Bach** fugue. Perhaps he needed the ritual to feel like a musician, or maybe he was honouring his hero and seeking his ‘blessing’ for the day. As for me, I get up before dawn every morning and take a taxi to my gym

for a workout, without fail. It’s about finding something that helps you focus and say, ‘Let’s get this day started’. Over time, as these routines become second nature, discipline morphs into habit. A regimen of this sort puts you in a place where you can continue to work on something, day after day, year after year. But it’s not like training wheels – it never goes away; the need for it continues throughout your career.

There is a perennial debate between people who believe that creative acts are born of transcendent acts of inspiration or hard work. Which side are you on?

I’m in the middle. We have to acknowledge that anything we do well, we do because we possess an aptitude for it, but we also have to learn to be disciplined and apply ourselves to its pursuit, and that always entails hard work. It takes great skill to bring





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something you've imagined into the world – to use words to create believable lives, to combine ingredients to make a flavourful dish – and no one is born with that skill. It is developed through exercise and repetition, through a blend of learning and reflecting that is both painstaking and rewarding.

At the same time, inspiration and hard work complement each other, because you need to be consistently 'available' in order for those wonderful moments of transcendence or inspiration to occur. When this happens, you 'get something for free' that day: something comes along that you weren't expecting at all, and guess what – it's *really* right. But that can only happen if you are *there*, putting in the work. Creative endeavours can never be mapped out ahead of time; you have to allow for the suddenly altered landscape or the accidental spark, and you have to see it as a stroke of luck rather than a disturbance of your 'perfect scheme'. Habitually creative people are, to quote **E.B. White**, "prepared to be lucky."

You have said that there is "a consistent order to the quality of ideas." Please explain.

There's an exercise that I like to conduct whenever I lecture at colleges. I present the audience with a found object – the last time, it was a wooden stool – and I give them a challenge: 'You've got two minutes to come up with 60 uses for this stool'. The first few things they come up with are never very original: sitting on it, standing on it; burning it as fuel. But after that come some more imaginative uses: a doorstep, an anchor, a weapon, a raw material for sculpture. Then the final ideas come straggling in, and they are always the most creative: a surface for gymnastics, a tool for taming lions, a

dancing partner. The closer we get to the 60th idea, the more imaginative they become, because people have been forced to stretch their thinking. It's the same every time: the final set of ideas show insight, curiosity, even complexity, as later thinking builds on earlier thinking.

Two key things that get in the way of creativity are fear and distractions. What steps can we take to work around them?

The blank space can be very humbling; I've faced it my whole professional life. Common fears include disappointing someone, not having anything interesting to say, and not being perfect. The truth is, all of that is entirely possible: now get on with it! Distractions are also a big obstacle to good work. More and more, we find ourselves chained to our computers and iPhones. Other common distractions include different forms of entertainment, friendships and food – anything that subtracts from the discipline of focusing on something that you are really serious about.

As a result of all these distractions, I try to subtract things from my life. I've turned this into a ritual: I will sit down and list my biggest distractions and make a pact with myself to do without them for an entire week. Some perennially-tempting things on my list include movies, multitasking, background music and numbers. More than anything, I have found that I can live without numbers – the ones on clocks, dials, meters, bathroom scales, bills, tax forms, bank statements. For one week I tell myself to 'stop counting' – I won't look at anything with a number on it. The goal is to give the left side of my brain – the hemisphere that does the counting – a rest and let the more intuitive right hemisphere come to the fore.

Three Exercises to Boost Creativity

Exercise #1: Give Me One Week Without...

People go on diets all the time. Why not do the same for your creative health? Take a week off from clutter and distractions, such as...

- Mirrors
- Clocks
- Newspapers
- Speaking

Exercise #2: Build Up Your Tolerance for Solitude

Some people are afraid to be alone. The thought of going into a room to work all by themselves pains them. It's not the solitude that slays a creative person: it's all that solitude without a purpose. To build up your tolerance for solitude, you need a goal. Sit alone in a room and let your thoughts go wherever they will. Do this for one minute. Anyone can handle one minute of daydreaming; work up to ten minutes a day of this mindless mental wandering. Then start to pay attention to your thoughts to see if a word or

goal materializes; if it doesn't, extend the exercise to eleven minutes, then 12, then 13. Note that this activity is the exact opposite of meditation: you are not trying to empty your mind, you're seeking thoughts from the unconscious, trying to tease them forward until you can latch onto them.

Exercise #3: Give Yourself a Little Challenge

George Harrison once decided, as a game, to write a song based on the first book he saw at his mother's house. Picking one up at random, he opened it and saw the phrase, "gently weeps", whereupon he promptly wrote, "While My Guitar Gently Weeps." You can give yourself the same kind of challenge whatever medium you work in: paint only in shades of green; write a story without using the verb 'to be'; film a ten-minute scene, nonstop, with one camera. Giving yourself a handicap to overcome will force you to think in a different way.

- From *The Creative Habit* by Twyla Tharp

Most people wait until they go on vacation to deal with distractions. They might decide not to pick up their cell phone for the whole week, or to not watch the news 14 times a day. If you're able to let these things go when you're on vacation, you might want to think about letting them go on a more regular basis. For example, try this exercise for a few days: get out of the habit of looking at yourself in the mirror. You don't have to look at yourself four, six, ten times a day; you know what you look like. Get on with it! I don't recommend living without distractions as a permanent lifestyle, but anyone can do it for a week, and the payoff will surprise you.

You believe that each of us has a strand of 'creative code' hard-wired into our mind, and that it is as individual as the rest of our DNA. What are the implications for creativity?

Here's an example of how this manifests itself. We all find comfort in seeing the world either from a certain distance – from afar, at arm's length or in close up. We don't consciously make this choice, our DNA does, and we generally don't waver from it. Rarely do you find a painter who is equally adept at miniatures and epic series, or a writer who is at home in both historical sagas and short stories. **Ansel Adams**, whose black-and-white panoramas of the American West became the established notion of how to 'see' nature, is an example of an artist who was compelled to view the world from a great distance. He found solace in lugging his heavy camera on long treks into the wilderness so he could have the widest view of land and sky. This approach to expressing his creativity was in his DNA.

Focal length doesn't just apply to photographers – it applies to any artist. The sweeping themes of **Mahler's** symphonies are the

work of a composer with a wide vision. Contrast that with a miniaturist like **Satie**, whose delicate compositions reveal a man in love with detail. Only the giants like **Bach**, **Cezanne** and **Shakespeare** could work in many focal lengths. This is just one facet of many that make up an artist's creative identity. But once you learn about it, you begin to notice how it defines all the artists you admire.

The point is that each of us is hard-wired in a certain way, and that hard-wiring insinuates itself into our work. When I face a blank space I am alone, but I am alone with my body, my ambition, my ideas, my passions, my needs, my memories, my goals, my prejudices, my distractions and my fears. These 10 things are at the heart of who I am, so whatever I create will be a reflection of how they have shaped my life. The implication is that everyone who addresses a problem is going to do so in a different way. With experience, we learn that our first way of responding to something – which might seem instinctive at the time – is not necessarily going to be the best response. So we should seek to expand our 'instinctive range', if you will.

You have said that, "All art begins with memory." How can we be more proactive about mining what you call the 'veins of memory' within us?

While most people in the workplace – and in the Arts – think they have to be constantly looking *forward* to be edgy and creative, one secret of creativity is to *go back and remember*. There are as many forms of memory as there are ways of perceiving, and each one of them is worth mining for inspiration. Our memories encompass every fact and experience that we can call up at will from our 'cranial hard drives'. In its most common form, memory is the skill

that lets us store away both vital and seemingly-trivial data and images and experiences of our lives; but thinking of memory only in this way is too simplistic – it shrinks our minds down to the size and sophistication of a personal computer. Creativity has little to do with that kind of memory; if it did, the most creative people would all be found slaughtering the competition on *Jeopardy!* Creativity is more about taking all the facts, fictions and feelings we store away and finding new ways to connect them.

You remember much more than you may think you do, in ways you probably haven't considered. It's important to appreciate some of the more 'exotic' forms of memory – the ones lurking on the fringes, like *muscle memory* and *sensual memory* – whereby the sudden appearance of a smell or sound instantly floods the imagination with images from the past. *Institutional memory* is another important one. In these times, when organizations are so intent on downsizing, a lot of institutional memory is being lost. Whenever someone is let go, they leave with a repository of information about the organization in their head, and this should be considered well before the person leaves.

You believe that challenging assumptions is one of the keys to creativity. Please explain.

To me it is very fitting that we refer to sudden insights as 'lightbulbs' going off in people's heads. As we all know, the lightbulb was invented by **Thomas Edison** – a master at challenging assumptions. He systematized this in his notebooks and he tested everything, including employees. Before he hired a research assistant, he would invite the person over to his lab for a bowl of soup. If the candidate seasoned the soup before tasting it, Edison would not hire him; he didn't want to work with people who had built so many assumptions into their everyday lives that they *assumed* the soup wasn't properly seasoned. He wanted fresh minds that would make no assumptions, with an openness that allows ideas to wander in.

Describe the practice of 'scratching,' and some of the ways we can do this.

The first steps of any creative act are very much like groping in the dark. There is no definable end in sight, and it is very unsettling to not feel secure in one's direction. You're just restlessly squirming about and struggling to find a foothold. Everybody goes through this in relation to work or dealing with personal problems, and when it happens, you just have to acknowledge, 'Guess what: I don't know what comes next!' The next step involves looking around for clues or inspiration. If you don't see anything in the current environment that moves you, you need to move to a new environment and 'scratch' for inspiration there. Eventually, a sense of direction will emerge. As a dancer, I traditionally start on new pieces by asking my body, 'Okay body, what would you like to do today that we haven't done before?' or 'How would you like to do this a little differently? Help me find out what this piece is going to be about.'

Scratching is like clawing at the side of a mountain to get some sort of traction to keep moving onward. A fashion designer is

scratching when she visits vintage clothing stores or parks herself at a sidewalk café to see what passers-by are wearing; an architect is scratching when he walks through a rock quarry, studying the surfaces of a rock wall. We see rocks, but the architect sees and feels texture and assesses building materials. You can scratch in endless ways: by taking in a cultural event, by observing nature, by enjoying other people's handiwork, or through books. I once walked into the office of a four-star Manhattan chef as he was scouring through an enormous pile of cookbooks, obviously looking for menu ideas. Scratching can look like borrowing or appropriating, but it is an essential part of creativity.

When he needed an idea, Edison liked to sit in his 'thinking chair' holding a metal ball bearing in each palm, with his hands closed. On the floor, directly under his hands, were two metal pie pans. He would close his eyes and allow his body to relax, and somewhere between consciousness and dreaming, his hands would relax and open without effort, letting the ball bearing fall noisily into the pie pan. That's when he would wake up and write down whatever idea was in his head at that moment. It was his way of coming up with ideas without his conscious mind censoring them. That's an example of scratching, but it can be many things for many people.

Describe the seemingly-paradoxical importance of inexperience.

When you're starting out with any new project, everything feels fresh and there's a lot of enthusiasm for it because you don't know what you'll end up with. It's this condition of *innocence* that is so important for creativity – for me, in any case. **Picasso** used to say, 'I've been able to draw really well since I was about three years old, but it's taken me until I was 65 to figure out how to draw as well as a child.'

On that note, what effect does aging have on our creativity?

There is absolutely no reason for our creativity to recede as we age. My heroes are the artists whose bodies of work are consistently surprising and fresh: **Mozart, Beethoven, Yeats, Cezanne, Kurosawa, Balanchine**. They all had stunning early triumphs, but they kept getting better through their middle or later years. There is no excuse to retire your imagination. **R**



Legendary choreographer **Twyla Tharp** is the author of *The Collaborative Habit: Life Lessons for Working Together* (Simon & Schuster, 2009) and *The Creative Habit: Learn it and Use It for Life* (Simon & Schuster, 2003). She has choreographed more than 135 dances, five Hollywood movies and directed and choreographed four Broadway shows, picking up a Tony Award, two Emmys, 19 honorary doctorates, a National Medal of the Arts and a Kennedy Center Honor along the way.