

"Inspiration for your own creative journey." —Daniel H. Pink

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rediscover
your
creative
genius

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what was right about you

Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.

—PABLO PICASSO

Ask a roomful of five-year-olds how many are artists and every hand will shoot up. Ask a roomful of thirty-five-year-olds the same question and you might get one reluctant hand. Why is that?

The answer to that question begins by understanding who you and I were as children.

For years studies have shown that you were born with an ability to initiate new ideas and solve problems uniquely. "Children have an inbuilt drive for discovery," explains Tim Seldin, president of the International Montessori Council. "This drive for discovery continues to develop as they grow and become more adventurous in the things that they try out, from making mud pies in the garden to starting a worm farm in

the living room. Children are born with marvelous imaginations and a keen desire to explore the world."¹ In other words, you were born an artist—an individual with a large capacity to learn, adapt, and develop new ideas and solutions at any moment.

As a child, your brain thrived off what neurologists call your “right hemisphere”—the part of your brain that’s in charge of intuition and creative, social, and visual skill: the part of your brain that embraces new and unconventional ideas, the part that is fascinated by surprise, the part that doesn’t need everything to be neat and tidy and perfectly defined in order to find value. As a result, your mind was an ever-looping reel of whys and, more important, *why not*s. Curiosity was on overdrive. Imagination was rampant. Inspiration was anywhere and everywhere. The world was your canvas and the rules of creation were few if any.

Young boys turn sticks into swords and fight imaginary battles on a daily basis. They turn gutter streams into mighty rivers on which to sail their paper-made ships. Adventure, imagination, risk—these are hardwired into young boys. The type of toys they have or the locale in which they play doesn’t matter either. If a journey beckons, they will find what they need or make it out of anything in reach.

Boys don’t need to be taught to be creative. It pours out of them. And they are not the only ones.

Young girls transform themselves into ballerinas with lip gloss and any dress that fans with a twirl. Their dolls and stuffed animals become companions on a quest to find their prince and attend the great ball. Or they too venture off into the great unknown—to make the next great discovery, or

to find the buried treasure, or to simply explore the outer reaches of their imaginary world.

For young boys and girls alike, exploration is their daily reality.

Do you remember when your days were governed by your imagination? You could be whoever or whatever you wanted. You could travel around the world—even beyond the world—at the drop of a thought. There were no rules that said you couldn't or shouldn't because it wasn't time productive. Pragmatism, logic, and even safety did not stand in the way. You were free to sculpt your days into works of art—tangible representations of your unique creativity—filled with joy, enthusiasm, and fulfillment.

We functioned this way as kids because our worldview was incomplete. To learn and grow, we needed to be mass collectors of information through our various senses. We were learning a language. We were figuring out how to relate to others. We were discovering the laws of physics and learning how to run and jump, and to use our muscles and limbs more efficiently. In short, we were cross-training for the many scenarios life would eventually toss at us in rapid succession. Our primary environment needed to be a rich, vibrant, and imagination-fostering one.

Many companies around the world have created offices that mirror kindergarten classrooms, hoping to spark that same rich, vibrant environment of childhood. Companies like Google have used unconventional environments to help them create cutting-edge products. The company allows its engineers to spend 20 percent of their work hours exploring anything that triggers their curiosity. The freedom allows

employees to work alone and focus on something that tempts their fancy. It also allows employees who wouldn't normally intersect during the workweek to sit down together and let their ideas collide. Some of Google's greatest products grew out of this freedom—Gmail, Google Earth, Google Labs, and its flagship AdSense program.

What many don't know is that while Google hasn't admitted its inspiration for its 20 percent perk, it was probably the mining and manufacturing giant 3M, which began allowing its employees to spend 15 percent of their work time exploring the recesses of their imaginations in 1948. The company wanted to stand out in a postwar America, when rigidity defined the corporate landscape. It did so and continues to do so today. Its legendary Post-it notes were birthed by an employee named Art Fry during his 15 percent exploration time; but that is only one of more than twenty-two thousand patents that have created approximately fifty thousand different products that bring in more than \$20 billion annually.² 3M is an innovation volcano.

Could we be oversimplifying the reasons for such companies' constant creativity when we link it to their promotion of employee imagination and exploration? While there are certainly other factors that make the Googles and 3Ms of the world so hypercreative, when asked, the employees themselves, from executive to entry level, point to this free time as the major catalyst in shaping the companies' continued success. When Marissa Mayer was Google's VP of search products and user experience (she's now CEO of Yahoo!), she estimated that approximately half of Google's new products were the result of employees' 20 percent time.³ Kurt Beinlich,

a technical director for 3M, explained that his company's 15 percent time has "shaped what and who 3M is."⁴

There is something freeing, something magical, something exuberant, about an environment where we are not hemmed in by rules and time lines and are instead opened up to imagination, possibility, and learning. This describes the landscape of early childhood.

The idea of returning to childhood for wisdom is nothing new. While the world's greatest teachers and thinkers have for centuries debated every topic and philosophy under the sun, one thing they have agreed on is the need for adults to become like children again in order to not only see our days in their fullest colors but also to pull ourselves out of ruts and push us through life's challenges.

Jesus famously scolded his disciples when they kept the children in a crowd from approaching him. "Let the little children come to me," he insisted, "and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."⁵ Sigmund Freud lamented, "What a distressing contrast there is between the radiant intelligence of the child and the feeble mentality of the average adult." Heraclitus wrote, "Man is most nearly himself when he achieves the seriousness of a child at play." Friedrich Nietzsche asserted, "In every real man a child is hidden that wants to play." And according to Mahatma Gandhi, "The law of love could be best understood and learned through little children."

Albert Einstein once wondered how it came to be that he was the one to develop the theory of relativity. He explained, "The reason, I think, is that a normal adult never stops to think about problems of space and time. These are things

which he has thought of as a child. But my intellectual development was retarded, as a result of which I began to wonder about space and time only when I had already grown up. Naturally, I could go deeper into the problem than a child with normal capabilities.”⁶

In Einstein’s opinion, his genius was the result of remaining childlike into his adult life. He would later famously assert that “imagination is more important than knowledge.”⁷ It’s a surprising assertion from the iconic genius. It is also surprising to learn that Einstein was no child prodigy. He was what we would call today a remedial student and a problem child.

“Einstein was slow in learning how to speak . . .,” explains Einstein biographer Walter Isaacson. “He also had a cheeky rebelliousness toward authority. . . . But these traits helped make him a genius. His cocky contempt for authority led him to question conventional wisdom. His slow verbal development made him curious about ordinary things . . . that most adults take for granted.”⁸

Fortunately for Einstein—and the world—his parents rejected the traditionalist notions that their child was problematic. They continued to support his wild mind and unconventional habits. It paid off when he was old enough to channel his artistry with more developed skill and precision.

This childlikeness—or in some respects childishness—was also responsible for the birth of what we know today as Outward Bound, the world’s largest outdoor experiential-education organization with facilities in thirty countries and six continents. Today the organization’s original, unorthodox training is offered through courses for corporate team build-

ing, inner-city youth, and specific populations like alcoholics and growing families. These courses are based on founder Kurt Hahn's belief that when people are reintroduced to adventure, exploration, and risk they are able to redefine or expand their perceptions of what is possible not only in their own lives but in the lives of those around them. "There is more in us than we know," he wrote. "If we can be made to see it, we will be unwilling to settle for less."⁹ The name "Outward Bound" says it all. It is a nautical term coined by Sir Lawrence Holt, a British shipping baron whose money and resources helped greatly expand the organization. It was used to describe a ship leaving the safety of its harbor and embarking on the mysterious open seas. This outward-bound inclination is something you and I followed instinctively as children.

Armed with only our imagination and the basic trappings of our bedrooms, basements, or backyards, we left the safe harbor on a daily basis. We climbed on counters, then climbed trees, then attempted to scale our houses. We leapt off the bottom stairs, then the middle stairs, then the backyard fence. Dangerous, inexplicable worlds called to us. We ran faster. Flew higher. Danced harder. Yelled louder. We exhausted ourselves in exploration and innovation. And we learned more in our first seven years than we learn in any other seven-year span in our lives.

We were truly wired to create when we were young. This doesn't mean we should stop exploring, discovering, and innovating once we are older. Today's reasons for creative breakthrough may be even stronger. We should be inspired by the fact that as adults we are far more equipped to do

something truly meaningful and lasting with our discoveries. Not only can we make our lives an everyday adventure; we can enlighten the lives of others too. But to achieve our full potential, we have to do away with the notion that curiosity, imagination, and exploration are child's play.

What Einstein, Nietzsche, Gandhi, and Jesus understood is that there are unspoken maxims we embrace as children that even the most educated, experienced, advanced adults should never abandon if we want our days to still fascinate and fulfill us.

1. *Mystery Adds Meaning*

When Isaac Newton was asked to describe his most productive days as a scientist, he explained, "I was like a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me." When mystery leads, curiosity follows. Whys, Why nots, and What ifs. There are few things more constant in a child's life than curiosity.

When curiosity is a driving force, a person remains interested, present, in passionate pursuit. Kids are notorious for driving their parents crazy with their incessant questions. But these questions are the reason they learn so much so quickly. They also keep life interesting.

Consider the greatest films you've seen or books you've read. It was undoubtedly the mysterious elements of them that kept your interest piqued and senses sharp in order to satisfy your curiosity. Mystery is the reason you watch an

intense five-minute sequence in a film and wonder if you took a single breath. It's the reason your limbs can unknowingly fall asleep in the midst of an engaging conversation with someone you love. It's the reason we are still fascinated by other galaxies and outer space and the possibility of life on other planets. Mystery is the reason people like business tycoon Sir Richard Branson, *Titanic* and *Avatar* director James Cameron, and Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos spend millions of dollars to explore the deepest depths of the world's oceans.

There is promise in mystery: the promise of virgin paths and uncharted waters. And, if we keep searching, there is the promise of discovery. Mystery makes everything more interesting, and more interesting means more meaningful. Creativity is born of mystery.

2. Ignorance Leads to Breakthroughs

"Einstein's vast knowledge of mathematics and science increased steadily throughout his life," explains author Scott Thorpe in his book *How to Think Like Einstein*. "But when we look at Einstein's problem-solving output something seems wrong. . . . The most profound breakthroughs came during a remarkable year during the beginning of his career. But in later years, Einstein's problem solving dropped off." Thorpe goes on to describe a fascinating and revealing trend in the life of the archetypal genius. It was during his first year out of college, while he was working at the Swiss patent office "reviewing improvements to laundry wringers" and doing physics "on the side," that he discovered $E = mc^2$. He was no less brilliant in the subsequent years and in fact knew

3. Later Means Never

Spend an hour around any child and you know they have an unyielding tenacity. They pursue their desires in the moment they arise and do not quit until they have what they set out to get. They want it and they want it now. Later means never. While this tenacity mixed with immediacy can drive a parent mad and lead to disciplining a child, it has a positive side. It is the reason children are masters at spontaneity. They are up for anything, anytime—especially before the requirements of school give them reasons to say no.

Ice cream at 7:00 A.M.? Absolutely.

Trampoline at 10:00 P.M.? Why not.

Song in the middle of a crowded restaurant? Which one would you like to hear?

As children get older, they become more aware of others' opinions and the expected etiquette of given situations. Before then, however, there are no self- or socially imposed limits on when and where fun, beauty, and breakthroughs can happen.

The idea of lucky breaks has been prevalent in our society for some time—especially when describing actors and performing artists. The truth, however, is that most of these so-called breaks were the result of individuals exploring possibilities spontaneously, in the moment they arose.

In his book *Earning Serendipity*, author Glenn Llopis cites some of the most well-known recipients of spontaneity's rewards. "An apple fell from a tree," writes Llopis, "and a man saw something more than bothersome fruit. Isaac Newton saw an expanded theory of gravity. A torsion spring fell from

more about science and math and had more uninterrupted time to focus on his experiments alone and with the greatest fellow minds of the day. And yet, as Thorpe points out, “he didn’t solve any more scientific problems.”

“We would expect Einstein’s problem solving to correlate with his intelligence and knowledge,” concludes Thorpe. “Instead, his problem-solving ability declined as his knowledge increased. Innovation was highest when knowledge was lowest.”¹⁰

It is the ultimate curse of knowledge: that when we know the most, we are often least able to see new solutions to old problems or new ways to approach entrenched relationships, systems, or hierarchies. Our great knowledge is often the greatest hindrance to creativity in problem solving because the thought of setting all that knowledge aside in favor of a blank slate seems ludicrous. But the blank slate is the secret weapon of every child. At that age, you had nothing to fall back on. Nothing to precolor your assumptions. No mental files to flip through. Few past experiences from which to draw conclusions.

As a child you based your conclusions on your latest exploration or experimentation. Your knowledge was real-time and constantly evolving because your mind remained flexible and able to adapt your conclusions to your latest discovery. You constantly reserved the right to withhold judgment until further review. With this open-mindedness you remained able to see things, not as you were inclined or instructed to see them, but as things really were. Perhaps even better than they were. Ignorance—even the voluntary kind—leads to breakthroughs.

a worktable and a Naval officer saw more than a clumsy spill. Richard James saw a Slinky. A rubber compound spilled onto a tennis shoe and a chemist saw more than a stubborn stain. Patsy Sherman saw Scotchgard, a spill to protect against all spills. A moldy culture of bacteria sat forgotten in a laboratory, yet a scientist saw more than dirty equipment. Alexander Fleming saw penicillin.”¹¹

Llopis goes on to tell the story of the Swiss electrical engineer George de Mestral, who went on a daylong hunting trip with his dog in 1941. When he returned home after the day in the foothills of the Alps, he noticed dozens of burrs stuck to his wool pants. They sparked a childlike curiosity. He pulled one free and observed it under a microscope. He noticed the burr had tiny hooklike arms that allowed it to grab the tiny loops of fabric on his pants. An idea was born, but not just any idea—one that would lead to the creation of a multimillion-dollar company.

The idea: Velcro.

It’s one of those creations, like the hanger or the paper clip, that seems so simple we could have thought of it ourselves. It is usually true. We could have come up with the idea, maybe even should have—but only if we had allowed space in our often stringent schedules and blinkered mind for spontaneous creativity. As a child, you had only two things on your calendar, and both of them could occur at any moment of any hour: exploration and creation. Rescheduling wasn’t an option. It was now. Or it was never.

4. Play Is the Supreme Catalyst

Of play, author Jack Uldrich writes, “It allows people to practice skills they might need later down the line. But play goes beyond such life skills. When we play, we gain practice manipulating things and controlling the outcome of events. We also devise new solutions for old problems and create new endings for our experiences.”¹²

The inimitable British essayist G. K. Chesterton wrote, “The true object of all human life is play.” It wasn’t just an offhanded mention. Chesterton wrote many essays and books on various themes but none more than the subject of play. *Manalive* is a case in point. The title alone reveals its thrust, but the story itself is anything but predictable. It is the story of Innocent Smith, a man who is either completely mad or the most brilliant one of all. He blows onto the scene of a dull and lifeless London boardinghouse on the wings of a great windstorm, wearing a tight green suit. To say he is eccentric is an understatement. He is so vivacious and full of antics that few know what to do with him. But they are drawn to his sweet nature nonetheless. Soon Smith’s presence reverses the mood of the dreary boardinghouse. A once hesitant Inglewood confesses his love for Diana Duke, the landlady’s niece. A cynical journalist named Michael makes amends with the heiress Rosamund Hunt. And Smith himself makes secret plans to elope with the heiress’s paid companion, Mary Gray. All seems perfect—until two doctors appear with the news that Innocent Smith is wanted on charges of burglary, bigamy, and attempted murder. Smith pulls a revolver and,

seemingly confirming the charges, shoots twice at one of the doctors, narrowly missing his head.

Smith is subsequently tried, but in an unexpected twist all evidence points to his being, like his name, innocent of all charges or, as Chesterton puts it, “blameless as a buttercup.” In a masterful conclusion, the truth is revealed: Innocent Smith shot at people to inspire them to value their lives; the house he broke into was his own; and the women he allegedly had an affair with were all the same woman—his wife masking her identity with aliases so they could continually reenact their courtship.

Innocent Smith would be a welcomed addition to many homes and offices I know. He is a fictitious, childlike character that represents that missing element in so many adult lives. But the point is not that we need him. The point is that we can be him. We can enter the office with more pep in our step, a curious smirk, an eager expectation that any workday can be a great adventure if we know how to think and where to look.

At one point we all were as playful as Innocent Smith.

This is not just an unsupported hypothesis, as author Jack Uldrich points out. “Play has consistently been found to reduce stress, increase energy levels, brighten people’s outlook, increase optimism and foster creativity.”¹³

A rediscovery is in order. No, a *resurrection*. A resurrection of the manner in which you used to live out your days. A resurrection of the person you used to be. “Life is a hypocrite,” wrote British playwright Christopher Fry, “if I can’t live the way it moves me.”¹⁴ It’s time to live as you are moved to live. With passion. Curiosity. Freedom.

“Play without keeping score,” writes Roy Williams, founder of the Wizard Academy in Austin, Texas. “Play requires the relaxation of the uptight mind. We are rejuvenated and revitalized by it. Children are happy because they play. Adults are unhappy because they do not.”¹⁵

When we were children, despite the circumstances surrounding us, despite our lack of skills and tangible resources, life still burst forth with possibility at every turn. In that context, creativity flowed wildly and continuously. We lived by the rhythms in our hearts and in the world around us. We fearlessly followed the paths of curiosity before us, wherever they might lead. We did this every day.

But that was then. Somewhere, somehow, our innocent, hypercreative life began to give way to another less wild and less wondrous existence. The easy explanation is that we grew up. It's only part of the story.