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SHORT

OLIVER SACKS

The Creative Self

—
From *The River of
Consciousness*

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All children indulge in play, at once repetitive and imitative and, equally, exploratory and innovative. They are drawn both to the familiar and the unusual—grounding and anchoring themselves in what is known and secure, and exploring what is new and has never been experienced. Children have an elemental hunger for knowledge and understanding, for mental food and stimulation. They do not need to be told or “motivated” to explore or play, for play, like all creative or proto-creative activities, is deeply pleasurable in itself.

Both the innovative and the imitative impulses come together in pretend play, often using toys or dolls or miniature replicas of real-world objects to act out new scenarios or rehearse and replay old ones. Children are drawn to narrative, not only soliciting and enjoying stories from others, but creating them themselves. Storytelling and mythmaking are primary human activities, a fundamental way of making sense of our world.

Intelligence, imagination, talent, and creativity will get nowhere without a basis of knowledge and skills, and for this education must be sufficiently structured and focused. But an education too rigid, too formulaic, too lacking in narrative, may kill the once-active, inquisitive mind of a child. Education has to achieve a balance between structure and freedom, and each child’s needs may be extremely variable. Some young minds expand and blossom with good teaching. Other children (including some of the most creative) may be resistant to formal teaching; they are essentially autodidacts, voracious to learn and explore on their own. Most children will go through many stages in this process, needing more or less structure, more or less freedom at different periods.

Voracious assimilation, imitating various models, while not creative in itself, is often the harbinger of future

creativity. Art, music, film, and literature, no less than facts and information, can provide a special sort of education, what Arnold Weinstein calls a “vicarious immersion in others’ lives, endowing us with new eyes and ears.”

For my generation, this immersion came mostly from reading. Susan Sontag, at a conference in 2002, spoke about how reading opened up the entire world to her when she was quite young, enlarging her imagination and memory far beyond the bounds of her actual, immediate personal experience. She recalled,

When I was five or six, I read Eve Curie’s biography of her mother. I read comic books, dictionaries, and encyclopedias indiscriminately, and with great pleasure.... It felt like the more I took in, the stronger I was, the bigger the world got.... I think I was, from the very beginning, an incredibly gifted student, an incredibly gifted learner, a champion child autodidact.... Is that creative? No, it wasn’t creative...[but] it didn’t preclude becoming creative later on.... I was engorging rather than making. I was a mental traveler, a mental glutton.... My childhood, apart from my wretched actual life, was just a career in ecstasy.

What is especially striking about Sontag’s account (and similar accounts of proto-creativity) is the energy, the ravenous passion, the enthusiasm, the love with which the young mind turns to whatever will nourish it, seeks intellectual or other models, and hones its skills by imitation.

She assimilated a vast knowledge of other times and places, of the varieties of human nature and experience, and these perspectives played a huge part in inciting her to

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