

A CHIP OFF THE CREATIVE BLOCK

I have been staring at a blank computer screen for the past few nights trying to think of what to write. It is what they call writer's block- or what I like to term the emergence of air pockets in the brain. It is widely thought that writer's block is part of a natural ebb and flow in the creative process and it comforts me to think that this word blankness is indeed not emptiness at all but an essential part of creativity. All of a sudden having nothing to say has a sort of sexy cachet, a Bohemian panache, a Rive Gauche ring to it. I am not an empty vessel but a creative genius struggling to spew forth my next masterpiece from the very depths of my artistic soul. Suddenly writer's block is a desirable mind disorder, the envy of the plebeian, mortal masses.

Writing, performing, presenting, influencing and so on all call on a process of giving life to an idea.. You have a metaphorical blank canvas in front of you, and you are required to make a mark on it - to create. But the creative process is an elusive one. Creativity and ideas don't come on command; they seem to spring up when we least expect it — like a rod of lightning bending our mind, setting fire to our soul, unexpectedly showing us the way or equally capriciously leaving us lost in the wilderness.

Clearly you have to be slightly off your head to be creative. There is a sort of manic genius associated with thinking outside of the box, What on earth did Sol Kerzner's accountant think when he stood on a barren piece of bush in the what was then called Bophutatswana and proclaimed his vision of creating a City in the Sun? 'Lets look at the fats here, Boss. Middle of nowhere, uneducated, untrained work force, non existent infrastructure, no clientele...'

Plato said that creativity is a "divine madness...a gift from the gods." Seneca recorded Aristotle as having said, "No great genius was without a mixture of insanity". One of Shakespeare's characters says, "The lunatic, the lover and the poet are of imagination all compact," and Marcel Proust said, "Everything great in the world is created by neurotics. They have composed our masterpieces, but we don't consider what they have cost their creators in sleepless nights, and worst of all, fear of death."

The fact that many eminent creative people are linked with mood disorders, which to all intent and purposes is a euphemism for manic depression, should not go unnoticed. Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Vincent Van Gogh, Michelangelo, Charles Dickens and Ernest Hemmingway and John Forbes Nash Jr. are just a few that spring to mind. Sylvia Nasar's "A Beautiful Mind", a biography of the brilliant mathematician who laid the foundations of game theory in 1949 at the age of 21, describes in some detail the complex theory that ultimately led to Nash being awarded a Nobel Prize in Economics in 1994; but more importantly, she has written a touching account of a man caught between genius and madness. For three decades he suffered from severe bouts of paranoid schizophrenia, and as a result he spent extended periods in mental hospitals, lost his family and, worst of all for a mathematician, could no longer solve profound problems.

And what of Savants, those flawed individuals who simultaneously inhabit two different worlds, one of eternal childlike simplicity and the other of highly-developed and deeply gifted artistic, mathematical or scientific genius, a mental dichotomy and unfathomable contradiction which is beyond our, or their, comprehension.

Clearly the creative process is a mystery. We can know about pieces of it, but we are unlikely to unravel all of it. Many questions remain unanswered. If there is a significant correlation between creative genius and mental disorders, how do we explain it? Do mood disorders lead to creativity or the other way round, something about wrestling with the primitive core or with our moods, that facilitates the creative process? Or is there a vulnerability that accompanies creative thought? How do we explain the exceptions — those who achieve greatness and lead healthy lives? Are people with certain types of difficulties (e.g., mood disorders, substance abuse) more attracted to the creative fields than are people without such difficulties or does the creativity spawn the problems, - something about the creative process itself that over time contributes to disintegration? Or are the struggles for health the result of the cumulative effects of repeated interactions with others who lack understanding or tolerance?

This translates on a more basic level into the workplace. So often in the work situation we are asked to turn on the creative juices like a tap to engage in a brainstorming or strategizing session. These are the few times when corporate creativity is encouraged. The rest of the time your employer expects you to adhere to rules, operate in functional silos, conform to the norm and think within the box. It is no coincidence that at HRMC we currently have 3 jobs for Risk and Compliance manager on our books. Employees prefer to play it safe and play by the rules rather than let their free and creative spirit loose and employers work hard at ensuring that they hire safe, mentally well-balanced and sane workers. 'Mad' individuals are avoided frantically and any sign of uniqueness is construed as trouble, unless in controlled situations and at a pre-scheduled time and place, when our erstwhile conformists are expected to don their manic, creative hats and undergo a complete personality change.

Clearly we have it all wrong. Let's employ the mad people right from the start, the weirdo's,, the off-the-wall, out-of-the-box thinkers. If all else fails it will at least make for an interesting wok environment! In a hundred years, well less really, we will all not be here and we will look back (difficult when you are not here) and say what a waste of bloody time, what a bore and why did I not work more with the crazy, ingenious , creative people?

This joke sums it up perfectly: 'A man is driving past a mental hospital when one of the wheels falls off his car. He stops and recovers the wheel but can't find the lug nuts to secure it back in place. Just then he notices a man sitting on the curb carefully removing small pebbles from the grass and piling them neatly on the sidewalk. "What am I going to do?" the man asks aloud. The fellow piling the pebbles looks up, and says, "Take one of the lug nuts from each of the other wheels and use them to put the wheel back on." The driver is amazed. "Wow!" he exclaims. "What a brilliant idea. What are you doing in a place like this?" he asks, nodding toward the mental institution. "Well," the man answers, "I'm crazy, not stupid."

In other words, you don't have to be mad to work here, but it helps!

