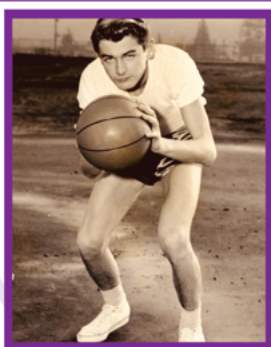




Personal and Universal Creativity

by George Swede



We are born with the instinct to explore—to do things that we have not done before. Recall when you were a toddler at play and how you invented new dramas with your toys and

practiced the new words you had learned and then strung together in ways that made your parents laugh. Recall also how you dealt with a challenge when older—learning how to ride a bike. While frustrated at first, you persisted and then became elated when you and the bike stayed upright at last. Your success depended on figuring out how to balance on two wheels while at the same time maintaining motion forward. Such a fusion of separate functions or contexts is at the heart of being creative whether on a small (personal) or large (universal) scale.

Of course, personal creativity, such as learning to ride a bike, does not get our names into history books, but it involves the same strategy used by persons who are the first to do something no one else has done before and that is also of universal importance. For instance, Albert Einstein linked the seemingly unrelated contexts of energy and matter to formulate his theory of relativity. When he first proposed their relationship, most people had difficulty understanding how something intangible, such as energy, could interact with something real, such as matter.

Great artists also connect disparate contexts in surprising and powerful ways. For instance, Georgia O’Keeffe fused detailed realism with distorting abstraction in her paintings of the natural world, as in “Black Iris.” Literary works are also full of surprise juxtapositions. Who would ordinarily think of “solitude” and “pig” as having any connection?

Yet poet Yukio Mishima manages with “My solitude grows more and more obese like a pig.”

Two contexts or planes of thought might be central to a creative act, but they are never enough. For instance, Einstein had to add a number of other concepts to energy and matter, such as time, space and motion, before he could complete his theory of relativity. In addition to linking realism with abstraction, O’Keeffe had to decide which medium to use (she chose oil instead of pastel, charcoal, or watercolor) and which surface (she chose canvas instead of paper, wood, or plaster). Such decisions are important because each medium and each surface will give a work of art a different appearance. As for Mishima and his one-line poem, his choice of the word “obese” was crucial



“Georgia O’Keeffe fused detailed realism with distorting abstraction in her paintings of the natural world, as in ‘Black Iris’.”

for a successful merger of “pig” with “solitude.” Consider the unfortunate result if “swine” had been used instead of “pig.” Also, the order of the poem’s



Helices (Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2016, 2019)

ten words is perfect. Any other order would have undermined the impact.

The examples given so far involve only one person. In fact, most accomplishments, great or ordinary, involve working with others. Making movies, presenting plays, musicals and concerts, putting up art installations, and so on, almost always involve a team of people. The same can be said about research in all of the sciences.

When the outcome is an historical first, then it is universal creativity; when it is replayed or rerun, it is personal creativity.

One more important difference exists between personal and universal creativity—the former does not require a tangible outcome. Instead, personal creativity can be a new feeling or attitude about the self or others that is significant. Such a change can arise from any circumstance—during a walk on the seashore or through an art gallery; during the reading of a poem or novel; or while watching a film or play; or while listening to music or when falling in love. In fact, personal creativity is what makes us look forward to each day; it is what brings us joy and makes life worth living.

George Swede is a Professor Emeritus at Ryerson University in Toronto and a major figure in English-language haiku; the verses above are examples of his wry, poignant observations.



History Is A Tapestry

I want to be woven
into its design

Just a thread—
preferably
red