



CREATING THE STORY



CHARLES JOHNSTON

Creativity will determine our future.
In a sense it always has...

of TOMORROW

WHAT DEFINES US HUMANS is that we are infinitely creative: We are makers of tools, beliefs, and institutions, and ultimately makers of meaning. As our world grows increasingly complex—with ever more rapid and transforming technological advancement, with the clash and confluence of civilizations that inevitably accompany globalization, with culture providing fewer clear social guideposts—the creative demands on every human are increasing dramatically. Few would argue that a healthy future won't require of us every bit of creativity we can muster. ● But the determining factor in humanity's success or failure will be more than just how much creativity or innovation we can bring to bear. The particular challenges ahead require of us a new kind of creativity. The future demands that we bring a new fullness to our lives—new depths in ourselves and new sophistication in our understanding of what it means to be creative. In the end, it will require a maturity in our natures as creative beings that has never before been needed—or possible. ➔

RETELLING THE SOCIAL STORY

The personal and cultural questions confronting our times require that we discover what an expanded, more mature creativity is about. At some level, today's creative challenges present themselves wherever we look. Certainly it is there in relationships between nations. Historically, social identity has always before been predicated on having enemies, "evil others" on which to project our less savory impulses. In a globally interconnected world with increasingly available weapons of mass destruction, such projection is no longer consistent with a world in which it is safe to live. Just getting along will require a level of creative maturity new to us as a species.

The challenge is just as immediate in the most personal realms of our lives. Fifty years ago it was pretty clear what it meant to be a man or a woman (who went to work, who stayed at home, who mowed the lawn, and who cooked dinner). Today, as we know too well, life supplies fewer such ready-made formulas. It is not that men and women have suddenly become the same—indeed, part of what we are learning is how different we can be. But when we try to use the old dictates, the result is often frustration rather than fulfillment. Both love and personal identity require qualitatively new levels of creative discernment and courage.

The creative challenge in front of us further reveals its breadth with the critical need to rethink our whole notion of human progress. We've measured progress in modern times almost solely in terms of invention and material growth. Increasingly, though, we have invented things with the capacity to do great harm as well as great good. It is growing obvious to many that greater consumption is increasingly incompatible with planetary limits, and is becoming inconsistent with simple human happiness. If there is a core crisis in our time, it is a crisis of purpose. Our future can be sustainable physically or capable of engendering meaning only if, here too, we can bring a new kind of maturity and creativity to bear.

In an important way we are being called on to creatively rewrite the human story. I don't mean this in the whole cloth sense: The task in front of us is just as much about recognizing more deeply what that story has always been about. But the future does require that we see the world through more mature and creative eyes. In times past, cultural givens shielded us from much of the burden and responsibility that follows from our tool- and meaning-making natures. Increasingly, we appreciate that culture, too, is a human creation, and its choices are thus



ultimately a human responsibility. Recognizing and accepting that responsibility is the task on which our future depends. (I called my first book *The Creative Imperative* to emphasize the specifically creative nature and inescapability of these challenges, and my second *Necessary Wisdom* to point toward the critical maturity that confronting them would require.)

CREATIVE SYSTEMS

Much of my life's creative contribution has focused on the evolution of a body of conceptual work I call Creative Systems Theory ("CST" for short). CST proposes that teasing apart how our creative natures work can teach us a great deal about ourselves and provide important tools for making the decisions on which our future depends. Its thinking presents a detailed framework for understanding change and interrelationship in human systems of all sorts: within individuals, families, organizations, and nations, and with globalization—our species as a system.

Several aspects of the theory have special pertinence to understanding creativity in general, and the particular fullness and maturity of creativity that the future demands. An important topic of the theory is the recognition of creative stages that operate beneath the surface of human processes. CST describes how a developmental pattern underlies not just explicit creative acts, but the development of any creative process. My use of the term "creative" extends well beyond artistic or innovative creation. I refer to formative processes of all kinds and in their entirety—how any human phenomenon grows, develops, and relates



The creative challenge in front of us further reveals the critical need to rethink our whole notion of human progress.

TOM JOYCE

shifts from the mythic to the more solid and impassioned language of heart and guts. During the final delineations of creative “finishing and polishing,” the rational (or intellectual) assumes increasing preeminence. Addressing the final details of a process requires us to step back to bring a newly available objectivity to our perceptions.

(Please note that I have simplified the correlation of intelligences and creative stages. In fact we find each intelligence at every stage—manifest in particular forms unique to that stage. It is true, however, that with each stage one intelligence predominates.)

Our various modes of intelligence, juxtaposed like colors on a color wheel, function together as creativity’s mechanism. The depth and maturity of creativity asked of us by the modern world requires that we learn to more consciously appreciate this full complexity of intelligences in ourselves, and engage it in more fully integrative ways. An important piece of our needed creative maturity is bringing this new awareness and its ownership to that which makes our human capacities possible.

A further CST focus relevant to creativity and the future addresses personality differences. The Creative Systems Personality Typology presents an increasingly respected framework for teasing apart the very different ways each of us sees the world and organizes experience. It links intelligence and temperament with the observation that different people draw preferentially and in particular ways on different aspects of intelligence. We can think of the particular gifts of different temperaments in terms of the parts of the creative process with which they are most natively adept. An artistic type has specific access to “inspiration stage” sensibilities; someone who might become a teacher or a minister draws from the more heart and guts sensibilities of the “perspiration stage”; a professor or business person will relate to the rational and detail-oriented sensibilities of the “finishing and polishing” stage. (Again, for the sake of space, the description here is highly simplified. It doesn’t really work to equate professions and temperaments—some of the most interesting people in any profession are the exceptions.) Besides being valuable to self-understanding and to the work of teachers and psychologists, this perspective assists us in bringing a needed maturity to addressing critical social questions.

As part of my work directing the Institute for Creative Development, I bring together groups of knowledgeable people from around the world to address particularly thorny cultural challenges. Such “think-tank” groups have addressed topics from nuclear waste, to

to the world around it as it does so. By understanding the stages of creativity that suffuse any endeavor, we can grasp levels of human complexity that have previously eluded us, and actively learn from their processes and outcomes. (See sidebar on page 14 for a description of creative stages.)

Another important topic of CST is the question of human intelligence: What it is and why it works the ways it does. The notion that we are more than just rational beings, and that we have multiple intelligences, has been a major theme in psychology and education in recent years (witness the popularity of Howard Gardner’s books on multiple intelligences). CST holds that human intelligence is specifically structured to support creative process.

CST’s particular approach to the question of intelligence identifies four basic types. For ease of conversation, we can refer to them here as the intelligences of the body, the imagination, the emotions, and the intellect. The theory also proposes that these very differently ordered intelligences—or “sensibilities,” to reflect all they encompass—relate in a specifically creative manner. Particular ways of knowing, and particular relationships between ways of knowing, predominate at specific times in any human change processes.

During the subliminal germinations of creative “incubation,” bodily intelligence prevails. We know that which is yet to be born at best as faint bodily “inklings.” During the early ah-has and tentative first possibilities of creative “inspiration,” imaginal intelligence comes to the fore. Understanding speaks the language of intuition, metaphor, and image. During the struggles toward manifestation in what we could call creation’s “perspiration” stage, emotional intelligence moves to center stage. Truth

STAGES OF CRE

IN CREATIVE SYSTEMS THEORY, any formative process passes through two main phases—a phase of creative differentiation and a phase of creative integration.

CREATIVE DIFFERENTIATION

INCUBATION: All formative processes germinate in darkness, in a womb-world, before the appearance of form. The organizing image is a yet unbroken whole. In the creation of art, an invention, or an idea, the new impulse to possibility awaits the right moment to join the world of the manifest. In a lifetime, this is the prenatal and immediate postnatal period: The light of conscious volition is but preparing to awaken. In civilization's story, this is the Stone Age. Time resides as a timeless turning, each cycle of seasons repeating the last, past and present, light and dark are joined in the eternal presence of ancestors.

INSPIRATION: In the second stage we tend to feel most directly the magic of the creative. New creation first steps forth from mystery into the light. The first manifestation may be a sudden flash of insight or an almost imperceptible sense of something new becoming true. This is the playful and magical world of childhood. The first intimations of individual consciousness dance in a new kind of reality organized according to the laws of imagination. In the story of cultures we are in the time of the splendor and grandeur of early civilizations such as ancient Egypt and preColumbian Mesoamerica. The idea of spirit, essence, magic, or beauty emerges as the new reference for truth. Art becomes the most immediate language for depicting reality.

PERSPIRATION: Entry into the third stage may at first give the feeling that something creative is being lost. The necessity for hard work—and often struggle or conflict—steps forward: The possible must be made manifest. Though it may feel less magical, this stage is no less significant—or any less creative—than those that came before. In a lifetime this is adolescence, a heroic but often awkward or troubled time. We challenge external limits and establish inner ones to establish independence. The reward for our efforts is an increasingly solid, if often ambivalent, identity. In the West, this stage spans culturally



from the Roman Empire through the Middle Ages, when the language of magic was increasingly replaced by that of polar struggle and moral ardency. Social structure becomes feudal, and truth becomes based increasingly on the single question of whether an act belongs to the domain of good or the murky realm of evil. Through these struggles, culture as creation derives a new solidity.

FINISHING & POLISHING: In the fourth stage, new creation moves more fully into the light. We have given birth to possibility and established a crude structure. Refining, perfecting, and putting into final order remain. Here we can stand back from our work to address detail and surface. Truth in this stage is increasingly material, defined in terms of things that can be seen and measured. This is the stage of young adulthood, when refining our identities as individuals becomes the defining task. Our twenties and thirties are the one time in our lives when we can say we “think” we know who we are with good conscience. We see the future as a simple extrapolation from known form: I’ll ascend the ladder of success in my profession. I’ll raise my kids. I’ll reap the rewards of my labors. In the story of culture this is the Age of Reason, Invention, and the Individual. Over the last 300 years we’ve seen morally and blood-bound truth give way increasingly to a rationally and materially defined reality. A core European Enlightenment belief has been that all of life’s mysteries and all of our problems can be elucidated through the light of objective reasoning.

A T I V I T Y

"I truly believe that the study of creativity will become one of the most central and most exciting domains of the human sciences."

—mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Here we might have easily imagined creation complete—one of the characteristics of this transition point is that we assume that it is. But in truth, we are yet only half way. What follows is creative integration.

CREATIVE INTEGRATION

In creation's second half, the newly created form establishes a mature relationship to the personal and social contexts from which it was born. In the process, our relationship to what we have created derives newly conscious perspective and new depth. In a simple creative act, what continues to have value becomes "second nature," part of a newly expanded and integrated personal and social picture. In a human lifetime, these further developmental tasks come to the fore with the challenges of mid-life and life's second half. In the story of our culture, CST describes the core task of our time as a new Cultural Maturity. Culture's creative process integrates insights gained from our past, and moves beyond them into a more complete picture of the world and an expanded capacity to face unknown and unforeseen challenges. Effectively addressing any of the major challenges of our time—indeed just making adequate sense of them—requires this new maturity.

Photographs in this article are of the new Library of Alexandria (Bibliotheca Alexandrina) in Egypt, opened in 1998 near the site of the ancient library that once housed the vast knowledge and creative contributions of the ancient world. The multilingual letterforms cast into the outer shell of the building (page 10) are copied from sacred and scientific texts of antiquity.


healthcare reform, to the role of children in a healthy future. I want all the needed expertise to be present, certainly, but I also select for a diversity of personality styles. I know from experience that we are most likely to be effectively and wisely creative if we have all the diverse dimensions of creative process directly represented in the room.

CULTURAL MATURITY AND THE FUTURE

Creative Systems Theory describes the core challenge in front of us as one of "Cultural Maturity": Our times demand a specific kind of growing up as a species. We can use the following analogy: That which defines "maturity" in personal development is a newfound depth in the individual's ability to appreciate one's life as process, and recognize what most gives that process meaning. In other words, maturity is about being newly conscious of what makes us creative—our particular natures and our particular gifts—and about crafting a newly mature and reflective story of who we are. It is through this new depth of self-engagement that we resolve the crisis of purpose that characteristically confronts us at this juncture in our personal lives.

Through a similar process we may become able to confront society's modern challenges, and reconcile the crisis of purpose that seems to define our present time. I use this analogy to bring practical detail not just to understanding general change themes regarding the modern world, but to predicting future changes in particular domains—government, education, religion, science, art, and more.

The notion that existence is creatively ordered applies in more limited ways to systems of all sorts—the biological and physical as well as the human. It can be argued that, with the centuries in which we live, creation, through us, is becoming for the first time conscious not just of its various manifest forms, but of itself specifically as creation.

Yes, it is creativity that will determine our future. In part this is because future problems will increasingly require innovative solutions. More deeply, it is because our times are requiring us to rewrite our human story—an ultimately creative enterprise. Our hope for the future lies in how deeply we can take responsibility for all that it implies. 

CHARLES M. JOHNSTON, MD, is a psychiatrist, artist, and futurist. He is the founder of the Institute for Creative Development (www.creativesystems.org), a think-tank and center for advanced leadership training. He is currently writing two books, one on the implications of Cultural Maturity, the other on the ideas of Creative Systems Theory. He can be reached at cj@creativesystems.org.

