The creative process is much like communication between people, according to a psychologist-painter. Try too hard to control it—and ignore what "the other" is saying—and you're likely to fail.

HOW TO UNBLOCK

BY DESY SAFÁN-GERARD

I SOMETIMES CONDUCT group-therapy sessions for artists who are having trouble with their work, or in their personal lives. Among other treatment techniques, I ask them to paint to music, and to let it guide their thoughts and hands. One woman was particularly bothered by the idea, feeling that the music interfered with her control over the painting.

She demonstrated the same need for control in joint therapy sessions with her husband. The woman seemed unable to listen closely to what he was saying. When she finally realized the problem, she told me, "I think I know what Tom means when he complains that I don't listen. I thought I did, but I notice that sometimes when he's talking to me, I feel as uncomfortable as I do when I draw with the music. I want to *know* what I am drawing, just as I want to hold on to what I am thinking when he is talking to me. I don't like to let the music in; I don't like to let his words in."

This artist's insight into her work and marital problems illustrates the similarities between the creative process and communication with other people. Creativity—like communication—is a process of discovery, and the end product is usually quite different from what the person or persons had in mind originally.

Experienced artists know that they can't impose their will on the creative process; they must let it lead them. Picasso talked about the absence of planning, an attitude of exploring without trying to reach a specific goal: "When I paint, my objective is to show what I found, not what I was looking for." Julia Child identifies the creative cook as one who is able to recognize and capitalize on an accidental combination of ingredients.

According to psychoanalyst Otto Rank, the neurotic and the artist are similarly dissatisfied with themselves. Both try to create a new self-image, but while the artist's creation transcends the self, the neurotic is stuck striving only to maintain his self-image. The latter's energy is diverted from the immediate sensory experience, thus eliminating potential raw material for creative work. This difference underlies Rank's claim that the neurotic is an artist who cannot create.

I think it is more instructive to look at the creative process from the middle, while the work is going on, particularly if one wants to understand the nature of

Ponder Geombel

creative blocks. From this viewpoint, creativity is an interplay between the person and the matter at hand, a special quality of connection and communication. I am a painter myself, and I've worked as a therapist with many painters and writers. But creativity is not restricted to artists. Businessmen, teachers, scientists, engineers—everyone looking for answers to problems is engaged in creative work.

Whether the end result is a painting, a report, or a reorganization plan, creativity occurs when there is successful communication between a person and his work. It is an information-processing sequence much like the one psychologists use to describe communication between persons: according to their model, something is perceived, elaborated, expressed, and evaluated.

In the perception stage, we listen to the other person and gather information about him and his ideas. (For the sake of simplicity, I will use "he" throughout the article, with the understanding that it refers to both sexes.) In the elaboration stage, we start to understand his message and interpret its meaning. In the expression stage, we give our interpretation of his message in what we say to him. Finally, in the evaluation stage, we assess what we have expressed by listening to the other person's response.

Writers on creativity usually describe a similar process: incubation of an idea, illumination, elaboration, expression, and verification. One goes through all these stages—with the possible exception of incubation—many times during the execution of a single piece of work.

Perception

Of the four stages of creativity, perception may be the most critical in both generating and blocking the flow of communication. Perception is of both external and internal events. Allowing time for an idea to incubate is a vital part of this stage, since it is then that internal perception occurs. The high value we place on conscious effort can block creativity by trying to force work before we are ready to do it. Most of us feel tense and uneasy during this incubation stage. We feel that what we do before "getting down to business"—thinking, sharpening pencils, or just looking out the window—is a waste of time. Too much of it can be, of course, but we must allow our ideas and feelings to sort themselves out before they can become completely available to us.

I learned this shortly after I began studying painting. Before settling down to paint, I would often sit and watch the others in the class. Or I might simply relax for an hour, although the class lasted only three hours. Whenever I would virtuously decide not to "waste time," however, my work suffered. My inner command to get down to work seemed to override the experience, and the sense of urgency translated itself into work of inferior quality.

Trying to force work before we are ready is a common cause of creative blocks. When a person expects instant creativity and then fails to measure up, he blames himself, becomes discouraged, and decides, "This just isn't my day." Or, still worse, he may conclude, "I'm just not creative." Incubation can also take place while we are working. There is no full involvement, but we go through the motions, exercising skills until we make a deeper connection with the work.

This classic picture contains two distinct images: an old woman turned slightly toward the viewer or a young woman looking away. The old woman's mouth is the young woman's choker; her nose is the young woman's chin.

I am often asked whether creative people see things in an unusual way. They do seem more fluid in their ability to reverse figure and ground in what they perceive or think about. Many of us are familiar with figure-ground illusions that demonstrate how we structure what we see (see figure). Each illusion contains mutually exclusive perceptions: when one is seen, the other does not exist. Switching perception requires relaxed concentration, effortless attention. The viewer becomes immersed in the figure, and his eyes seem to wander in and out of it. Reversing cannot be accomplished by an act of will; we must wait for it to happen. The artist achieves perceptual freedom by giving himself access to both figure and ground, which helps him integrate figure and background as a painting achieves unity.

When I show slides of figure-ground illusions to students, I find that some of them see the second figure quickly. Others seem fixated on the first figure, and find it hard to spot the second figure in the ground, even when other students point it out to them. This rigidity in perception is another major contributor to creative blocks.

Perception is more than the identification of objects. It offers the perceiver the possibility of either a stable, safe world or a dynamic, unstable one. Because we prefer to perceive ideas and elements that do not threaten our view of the world and, more importantly, our view of ourselves, our preconceptions play a large role in the perceptual stage. The more willing we are to accept ambivalence and inconsistency, the wider the range of stimuli available to us.

Students who have the most difficulty with life-drawing seem to rely heavily on their knowledge of the body rather than on what they see with their own eyes. I know of one art teacher who has her students draw their own shadows as they stand in front of a big sheet of paper on the floor. Many insist on drawing a neck on the figure, although in that position the neck can't be seen. The teacher has a hard time convincing the students to draw only what they see, not what they know.

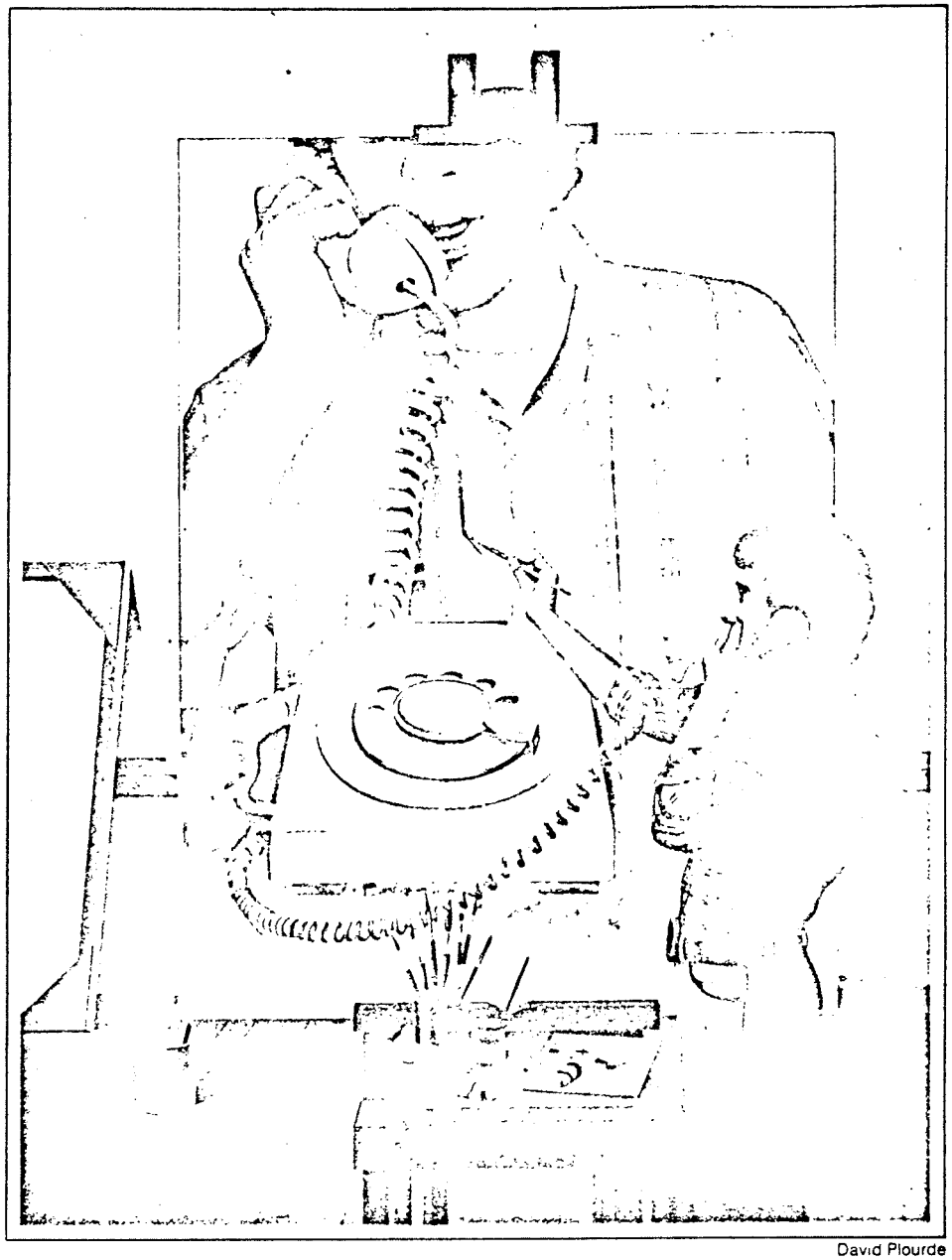
Another teacher works with individuals who don't know how to draw. He asks half of them to draw a human figure from an existing drawing, the rest to copy the same figure upside down in such a way that it can't be recognized as a figure. The second group is generally able to draw the figure with little difficulty, while the first group has trouble with it. The concept they have inside their heads interferes with what is in front of them.

We sometimes make the mistake of foreshortening the perceptual stage and entering the elaboration stage prematurely. If we are talking to someone, we reach a quick conclusion about what he means and then react to this conclusion. If we are writing, painting, or

working on a problem, we come up with the "right answer" too soon, and act on it. This usually leads to work that misses the mark.

As an artist works, he receives a message from what he has done to that point. He perceives and reacts to his last paragraph or to his last brush strokes. But if he has a definite goal in mind, he will be unable to respond to what he has just done. The work at hand should acquire a life of its own. No matter how accomplished the painter, unexpected things are bound to happen. Artists who are overly concerned with technique are not open to these "accidents"; they are likely to consider them mistakes.

The choice of a medium in painting reflects this tolerance of accidents. An artist can exercise far more control in oil painting than he can in watercolor, where the demands for quick reaction and solution are greater. But even among watercolorists, I have noticed a definite difference between those who can tolerate, and even marvel at, some accident and those who are so worried about having something go wrong that they wage an ongoing battle with their work. One artist told me recently that you must be especially strong to come back and paint again after the bad days when everything goes wrong. "A painting is not going to control me," he said proudly. "I have to control it." This is one way to look at a relationship with your work or with another person, but I don't see how anyone can derive lasting fulfillment from a relationship he thinks of as a constant struggle for control.



David Plourde

Elaboration

In the perception stage, we allow something to affect us. In the elaboration stage, we begin to reach conclusions about what we have perceived. If we are talking to another person, we reach decisions about his meaning and intentions. These decisions often change or completely suppress our original perceptions. We make our decisions rapidly, so rapidly that we get the impression that our conclusions—our way of structuring reality—*are* reality. In dealing with others, we impute intentions to them, unaware of the part our preconceptions have played in defining those intentions.

Similar steps occur in the creative process. When someone paints, for example, much of what looks like trial and error is actually the result of following leads. Suddenly the artist is into something quite different from what he had in mind originally, until the painting begins to make sense as a whole. I had a recent example of this myself.

I wanted to try out a new kind of watercolor paper, but I had no idea what to do with it. Glancing through a magazine, I came upon an article that contained a color picture of surgeons at work. I saw the subtle color gradations—from the bluish room and uniforms to the soft pink of the patient's flesh—and decided to work on a wash drawing that would capture these colors. I let my hand draw on the paper while I looked at the picture. The grain of the paper felt exquisite. I still had no clear idea of where I wanted to go with it, but I was enjoying how the paper reacted to the water and ink.

A few days later, back in my studio, I noticed the bloom of an epiphyllum I had picked that morning. "Life is in there, like in the flesh," I thought. I took my "surgeon" painting and began to draw the flower where flesh was in the original picture. I liked the flower and began to draw another one where the design needed it, not necessarily where the flesh was. The painting was now making sense and I was doing to it what *it* needed. The original subject matter was no longer relevant; the painting was turning into something else.

A good painter must have the ego strength to tolerate ambiguity and not force a story or painting into a preconceived mold. Researchers working with architects and writers have found that both score high in tests of tolerance of ambiguity. The creative person apparently has less need to make his self and the world around him stable.

Each time a person creates something, he projects part of himself into it. If he has been open to experience during the perception stage and has allowed the time necessary for elaboration, he may project parts of himself he doesn't know, and may not like. At this point, he often produces an "accident." I have seen students in art classes angrily trying to cover up such accidents. Then, slowly, they begin to appreciate the connection between the mistake and the rest of the work.

Carl Jung, working with his own creations and those of his patients, claimed that it is the reconciliation of opposites that promotes growth and personality integration. We integrate these opposites in our work, and later absorb them as part of our self-concept—making it wider, richer, more encompassing. By taking this larger view of ourselves, we learn to tolerate inconsistencies and ambiguities in ourselves as well as in our work.

An artist who wants to be truthful to himself must be just as concerned with authentic communication as is the person who wants to communicate effectively with others. This is difficult in both cases. In communicating with others, we may respond to one message when another is intended or we may ourselves transmit two messages out of our own ambivalence about exactly what it is we want to say. Many of us achieve only the semblance of communication with others; what we say is often not contingent on what the other has just said, and neither of us is aware that we are not communicating.

A young artist worries about not finding a truly self-expressive style until he learns to rely on his own inclinations and accept his work at this stage as reflecting his own limited experience. There are no words or colors or gestures that can convey an emotion that is not really there. The poet Goethe expressed the idea this way: "I have never tried to pretend in my poetry. I have never put into verse or expressed otherwise things I do not live, things that did not make me feel hot under the collar or that did not keep me awake nights. I wrote love poems only when I was in love."

Most artists are aware of an internal dialogue between the self and ever-present authority figures within themselves—critics who sound like angry and abusive parents rather than helpful advisers. The most disruptive quality of

CREATIVE EXERCISES: STARTING THE FLOW

It's easy to say, "Ignore your inner critics. Respond to what is in front of you, not to your preconceptions." But this is hard to do. In a creativity class at UCLA and in group-therapy sessions with clients, I've found two exercises especially useful in helping people see how their inner critics inhibit creativity.

One is a three-part exercise. In the first part, group members doodle on a piece of paper for 20 seconds. Then they get up and move to the chair on their right, to doodle on their neighbor's drawing. After 20 seconds, they shift again, and work on the next person's doodle. No one tells them what to strive for. They are just asked to look at the doodle and add to it.

The second part of the exercise is the same, except that they are told to deliberately spoil the designs of their neighbors. When asked to compare the spoiled drawings with the designs from the first exercise, most people are surprised to find them equally interesting. The spoiled drawings often have darker lines, use more of the space, and seem stronger; the collective drawings from the first exercise are whiter, lighter, and more delicate. Overall, group members usually like both sets of drawings equally, although they find it hard to believe that someone can do something appealing even when he sets out to spoil another's work.

In the exercise's third part, everyone is asked to do "what the drawing requires," to catch and continue the spirit of the original design. The word "requires" seems to awaken the artists' inner critics. Their spontaneity and freedom are gone; they worry about disappointing the person who began the drawing.

When I ask the group members about these drawings, they have difficulty responding to them. When they are doing what is required, the drawings seem dull and reflect the participants' feelings of discomfort.

The second exercise is verbal rather than graphic, and shows the creative advantages of responding freely to what is in front of you rather than making it fit some preconceived idea. Each person in the group receives a sheet of paper with a short sentence written at the top. I have used excerpts from poetry written by clients as well as phrases overheard in everyday conversation. For instance: "I'd better stop at the bank." "It will need a little gray." "We form a tragic pair."

Each person reads the line and adds the first line of his own that comes to mind. He then folds the paper so that only the bottom line is visible, and passes it along to the next person. The idea is to approach each new sentence without preconceived notions and let the sentence determine your response. People who are able to do this easily say they feel exhilarated. They realize they have an enormous reservoir of experience to draw from in responding to the sentence and enjoy letting it out appropriately and effortlessly. Those who find the exercise difficult are torn between expressing their own ideas and the demands of the sentence.

In a recent seminar at the American Film Institute, I heard an actor say that his best performances occur when he loses his sense of himself. The sentence exercise calls for this same loss of identity; it asks individuals to forget who *they* are and what *they* want to say, and respond to what is in front of them.

The exercise produces a flow of communication, which I let continue for about 20 minutes. People report that it usually takes a while to turn the situation from a struggle to an easy, pleasurable interchange with the sentences. One woman told me that she felt as if she were plugged in to an energy source that clarified her perceptions and made her feel powerful. Others likened the experience to the effect of an hallucinogenic drug. Their comments parallel what creative people in any field say when their work is going well.

When most members of a group manage to reach this open state, the results are striking. When read later on, the sentences do not appear to have been produced by different individuals, each responding only to the last sentence. The tone set by the first line—dramatic, playful, hopeless, banal—is carried through the entire sequence of sentences. —D. S.-G.

these internal critics is that they come into play before we need them. Evaluation should take place *after* expression.

Our internal critics are powerful because most of us believe we can create something worthwhile only while trying to do the "right thing." Doing something simply because it feels good seems inherently wrong.

Creative people develop ways to quiet the nagging voices within and free themselves to pursue the perception, elaboration, and expression necessary to the creative process. Timothy Gallwey, for example, has become famous by pointing out that we cannot really do well in tennis without winning the "inner game" first. Winning, in this case, means enlisting the critics in the experiencing "I" or quieting them down so things can happen naturally.

There are two basic ways of coping with this internal dialogue. Fritz Perls, the father of Gestalt therapy, assumed that the critics and the experiencing "I" represent two sides of an ongoing conflict in the personality, and that we must listen carefully to both to bring about integration. We should acknowledge the fears and objections of the critics with the expectation that they will then side with us and let us do our work.

An alternative approach assumes that since we cannot directly free ourselves of the critics, we must divert them or satisfy their needs by assigning them jobs. By busying them with tasks like attending to what is happening within our bodies, following the seams of the ball as it approaches us, counting our breaths, or repeating a mantra, we are free to be spontaneous.

Evaluation

The thrust of the humanistic movement in psychology has been to help people overcome the crushing self-criticism that we internalize from criticism by others as we grow up. I would argue strongly, however, against the assumption that all we need to be creative in art and successful in our relationships with others is to express ourselves without restriction. Perls's dictum "I do my thing and you do your thing..." has been taken to mean that only self-expression is important; connection with our work or with someone else, if it occurs at all, is a happy accident. In fact, however, creativity requires both freedom and containment.

When the work is done, the creative person must be able to disrupt his oneness with the work; to stand back and assess coolly what has happened. Few people associate the joys of creativity with these self-confrontations, but they are a vital part of creation. If we are too involved in the product, editing becomes excessively painful. By washing over part of our painting, deleting several nice-sounding paragraphs, or eliminating a pet idea from a report, we feel that we are eliminating a part of ourselves. But while involvement in what we do is essential to creativity, we must also be detached enough to assess whether what we have done is fitting.

> **"Trying to make work fit a preconceived idea often produces what artists call a creative block."**

The inability to let go of irrelevancies and excesses marks the amateur in any field. In watching student painters work, I have seen the same pattern many times. The student becomes aware that something is wrong, that a section of the painting is too busy. He asks the teacher for help and is told, "Do what the painting requires." After a good deal of painful scrutiny, he gathers up the courage to wash over the troublesome area. As he does so, he is overcome both with a sense of loss and an intense anger at the teacher.

But as he continues to work, the anger dissipates. The student lets himself be affected by what is happening in front of him. It is a different painting now, and he adjusts to its impact. The teacher does not seem like such an ogre after all.

Much of what strikes us as bad art, bad filmmaking, or bad writing is also self-indulgent. Such unwillingness to edit or change has its counterpart in communication between people. "Letting it all hang out" does not really improve communication. There is only so much a listener can take in at any given time. Although free expression may be cathartic for the communicator, it does not necessarily improve a relationship, a painting, or a novel. The creative person must develop a trust that the sense of loss he feels in revising his work does not last forever.

Just as we accept the "otherness" of people with whom we interact, so we must also accept the otherness of the work in front of us. Rigidity of perception, a need to control others, a need to maintain a certain concept of them—all stand in the way of the detachment and separation required for real communication. Allowing other people a life of their own requires generosity and humility. Similarly, we may want a painting, a poem, or a report to come out a certain way, but if it starts turning out differently, we should not impose ourselves on it, but listen to it.

Trying to make work fit a preconceived idea often produces what artists call a creative block. Other mistakes I've also mentioned earlier can have the same blocking effect: forcing work before you are ready, without giving your ideas time to develop; being so concerned with technique or form that you interrupt your flow of thoughts and impressions; setting your expectations too high, making you discouraged with what you produce; and starting to evaluate your work too soon, before the expression stage has run its course.

I've heard people say they create because they need to express themselves. In fact, just the reverse is true. What they need comes back to them from their work. One of my students asked others in the class, "What do you usually do when you feel blocked in your work?" A large percentage of the students said that they eat. It is the self-nourishment of the creative encounter that we long for, not the need to give nourishment by communicating something to others.

Desy Safán-Gerard is in private clinical practice in Los Angeles, California. She was born in Chile, where she received a B.A. in psychology. She later received an M.A. in psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and a Ph.D. in clinical psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, where she is currently doing research on close relationships. Safán-Gerard is also a painter who has exhibited her work in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

For further information, read:

Adams, James. *Conceptual Blockbusting*. W. H. Freeman, San Francisco, 1974. paper, $3.95

Ehrenzweig, Anton. *The Hidden Order of Art*. University of California, 1967. paper $3.95

Milner, Marion. *On Not Being Able to Paint*. International Universities, 1967. $10. paper, $3.95

Rank, Otto. *Art and Artist*. Agathon, 1932. $15

Ruesch, Jurgen. *Disturbed Communication*. Norton, 1972. paper, $3.95.

Samuels, Mike and Nancy Samuels. *Seeing with the Mind's Eye*. Random House, 1975. paper $9.95