

The Crisis of Creativity, and The Courage to Create

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In 1975, psychologist Rollo May published *The Courage to Create*, a collection of essays on human creativity, the creative process, and the role of creativity both as the foundation and the outcome of optimal health. Arguably, some of May's insights are more relevant for today's commercialized, technologized world than they were almost 45 years ago. In this article, I will explore three major themes from his book in the interest of providing both a cautionary statement about our current mainstream cultural lifestyle and a message of hope and inspiration for our age of transition.

First, May wrote, “If you don’t express your own original ideas, if you don’t listen to your own being, you will have betrayed yourself. Also, you will have betrayed our community in failing to make your contribution to the whole” (pp. 12-13). In *Creative Quest* (2018), Questlove (drummer for The Roots, the house band on Jimmy Fallon’s *Tonight Show*) observed that high-definition technology has attuned us more to minute and often inconsequential details at the expense of the big picture, and the internet has turned us into increasingly passive and sometimes uncritical consumers of an often-overwhelming volume of information. That is, we are increasingly gravitating away from actively using our imaginations to grapple with greater *ideas* and instead toward curating, repeating, and remixing others’ pre-existing work. While there is nothing inherently wrong with such endeavors in doses (and, indeed, it actually can be quite a form of creative inspiration as long as we are mindful not to get stuck there), it should give us pause that creativity may be endangered in this climate. This is especially pertinent during an era in which Big Tech companies are reaping big profits by subtly reinforcing our passive engagement in a digital vacuum (Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 2019) which can drain our capacities for creative and critical thinking.

Creativity also involves much more than the development of artistic and scientific products. May emphasized that the ultimate creativity entails actively employing our imaginations to determine how we can live in accordance with our values by constructively and responsibly writing and revising an ongoing life story that is interdependently situated within layers of greater cultural and cosmic narratives. This, of course, inherently requires allowing ourselves to be vulnerable and to take healthy social, cognitive and emotional risks that push us out of our comfort zones, off our beaten paths, and into a lifestyle characterized by curiosity in the face of life’s mysteries and paradoxes. This can be a daunting proposition, especially in a society that prizes certainty, standardization, and prescribed ways of being. On the other hand, as noted by psychologist Kirk Schneider (a student of May’s), “That which terrifies us is also that which liberates us.” Thus, creativity typically involves an element of surprise. What matters at the end of the day usually cannot be predicted on the front end or conjured up based on our pre-existing ways of knowing. Rather, it requires stepping

back (or zooming out) from our usual ways of seeing and, in Questlove’s words, “unfocusing [our] eyes in the right way, while still remaining focused on the picture” (*Creative Quest*, p. 30). That is, getting out of our own way and embracing life’s ambiguities, paradoxes, and possibilities with a sense of awe, humility, and wonder.

Second, May suggested, “Artists ... give us a ‘distant early warning’ of what is happening to our culture” (p. 23). To illustrate, consider how jazz in the 1920s and rock and roll in the 1950s exposed and unleashed repressed energy in the U.S. and Western European psyche. How might the narcissistic excesses that pervade the contemporary commercialized music scene both reflect and reinforce the measurable increases in loneliness in today’s youth compared to previous generations? Especially when that isolation and emptiness may be attributable to having grown up without awareness of what life is like without the internet and Smartphones (as noted by psychologist Jean Twenge, *iGen*, 2017)?

Third, May reflected, “Limits are not only unavoidable in human life, they are also valuable. ... Creativity itself requires limits, for the creative act arises out of the struggle of human beings with and against that which limits them” (p. 113). The Greeks suggested that *Oistros* (zest for life and energy to act which awakens creative power and will) arises out of the resolution of the dialectic between *Eros* (loving and living passionately) and *Thanatos* (awareness of life’s impermanence which awakens us to the importance of what we *do* have). The paradox of our technologized society is that it both reflects and encourages a fearful desire to conquer rather than cooperate with nature and its realities. As modern medicine has enabled humans’ capacity for longevity, we have come to focus increasingly on superficialities at the expense of depth and authenticity that make it easy to overlook—or, worse, forget—just how to live well. Likewise, with increasingly instant access to an at-times seemingly infinite stream of information and connections, automation has made us cognitively lazier and decreasingly motivated to rise to the occasion of an honest challenge (Nicholas Carr, *The Glass Cage*, 2014; Kirk Schneider, *The Spirituality of Awe: Challenges to the Robotic Revolution*, 2019). As an alternative, living creatively means intentionally accepting and embracing our human limitations (particularly our mortality) and committing our energy and focus to making meaning out of being alive during the bit of time we are allotted on earth.

Taken together, May admonished us to (a) create rather than conformingly consume and consumingly conform, (b) heed creative works as warning signs of life out of balance and as guides for authentic living, and (c) appreciate our human limitations as an organic source of creative tension out of which we can *be* well. He also challenged us to look past the literal, the predictable, the conventional, and the comfortable and to courageously listen to uncertainty in order to articulate the hidden obvious for ourselves and others. How do you see yourself living creatively today?