



THINK

like a

5 YEAR OLD

RECLAIM YOUR WONDER &
CREATE Great THINGS

LEN WILSON

Abingdon Press

Nashville

**THINK LIKE A FIVE-YEAR-OLD
RECLAIM YOUR WONDER AND CREATE GREAT THINGS**

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN 978-1-4267-8641-9

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15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
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Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV)

When you showed me myself I became someone else.

Joseph Arthur

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Preface

“How is the new job? Will you stay for a bit, or are you getting wanderlust?”

My friend’s note bothered me. I looked the word up. Do I have professional wanderlust—an insatiable desire to move from job to job, growing bored and never staying in one place very long? Is it obvious?

A few weeks later I read a statistic from the Gallup people that said only 13 percent of us are “actively engaged” in our jobs.¹ The majority of us—63 percent—merely put in our time at work and go home. According to the same study, the remaining 24 percent of us are actively disengaged. Although we may have been taught from an early age that fulfillment in life comes from naming passions and pursuing dreams (and we may still post nice quotes to that effect on our social networks), we no longer functionally believe it. We may have good educations; we may have decent salaries. But we are bored—at work, at home, in our personal habits, and in our spiritual lives. We don’t feel very fulfilled.

Not coincidentally, we also don’t feel very creative.

Defining creativity is tricky. Creativity is a means to something; it is not a product or a hard skill. You don’t ship creativity; you ship

what creativity does. Nonetheless, we have a sense of what *creativity* means. Call someone *creative* and you're probably referring to a certain type of person. Someone with energy. An art lover. A problem solver. Someone with good ideas.

The number one most popular TED talk is on the subject of creativity. In it, the presenter, creativity researcher Sir Ken Robinson, says that creativity is the process of having original ideas that have value.²

Paul Torrance, who has been called the father of creativity, says that creativity is a process of becoming sensitive to problems, deficiencies, gaps in knowledge, missing elements, disharmonies, and so on; identifying the difficulty; searching for solutions, making guesses; testing and retesting these hypotheses; and finally communicating the results.³

My five-year-old says that creativity is when you have fun and make stuff. He says it's not something he really thinks about. He just does it.

I like my five-year-old's definition best. Creativity includes having original ideas with value, and it includes the process of solving problems. But it is much more. Creativity is life. It's just what we do. We are created not to consume but to create. God's human design is that we would be cocreators.



And what is it that we create? I believe it is art, regardless of our vocation or location. We may be engineers or computer geeks or consultants or housewives or academics, but when we create, we become artists, each in our own way.



Seth Godin, the marketer who has become a leading spokesperson for the networked world of the twenty-first century, says that now, we

don't have creative interests or hobbies. In our postindustrial culture, what we used to call a hobby can now become our livelihood, if we have sufficient passion. To some degree, I think Godin makes a living selling the mythology of the Internet, that we can all be rich and famous. Yet I am intrigued with the glimpse Godin gives us of a God-given power and promise that each of us has a creative calling:

One ghetto that we used to reserve for artists was the idea that they made luxury items, entertainments and objects that had nothing to do with productivity or utility. I think that was convenient but wrong, even fifty years ago. Thomas Edison was a monopolist (and an artist). Henry Ford's slavish devotion to his concept of interchangeable parts and mass production was as much an art project as an opportunity to make money. Madame Curie gave her life to doing the art of real science.⁴

In other words, creativity is not just for people writing sonnets. Each vocation, each professional life can be engaged creatively. But it's even better than that. Godin hints at a truth about creativity. Creativity is about listening to, and living out of, the voice in your inner being—your heart, mind, soul, and strength; in other words, creativity is about being attentive to and acting in response to the combination of ideas and reactions and preferences that form your view of the world. This perspective, this unique form of expression, is the identity given to you by God and the origin of your creativity. We come with it preloaded. We're each born an artist. We're made to be creative. When we, as an image of God, exercise our heavenly impulse, the result of our expression, regardless of our field of endeavor, is art. This power, which reflects the essence of God, reveals itself in the passions we feel.



Preface

The problem is that while we have this supernatural power, this creative wellspring, within us, we've lost it. We've given in to forces that would steal and destroy this innate joy. We don't feel creative, and consequently, we don't feel fulfilled.

It's time to counter these destructive impulses, reclaim the art God has designed for us to make, and start creating great things. Maybe, along the way, we can also discover a more fulfilling life.

Part One

I Had It, but I Lost It

1

Trajectory | The Story of Creativity

What will be remembered as the pinnacle of American civilization, when the dust settles in at some future point, will perhaps be two things: the Internet and the moon landing. The moon landing is more remarkable, considering it was achieved with the computing power of an alarm clock. What powered the NASA program wasn't technology, but creative ingenuity.

The third manned mission to the moon, Apollo 13, didn't achieve its goal—the astronaut crew endured an on-board explosion and was forced to abort their mission—but it did demonstrate the creative power of the people involved. The explosion had taken the ship's power. The three astronauts were forced to abandon the command module, which is the main hold of the ship, and crowd into the small lunar module. There they realized that the on-board carbon dioxide removal system was built for a crew of two, not three, and for a day and a half reconnaissance trip to the lunar surface, not a four-day

haul back to Earth. The astronauts called and reported their carbon dioxide problem to flight control in Houston. They needed more filters. They were becoming hypoxic, losing breathable air, and without a quick solution would pass out and die.

The main command module of the ship had filters, but they were cube-shaped, and the ones on the lunar module were cylindrical. “Tell me this isn’t a government operation,” said Kranz, played by actor Ed Harris, in Ron Howard’s epic film of the experience. But they had no choice. It was their only possible fix. With insufficient round lunar module cartridges, the Houston engineers, in a matter of hours, had to figure out how literally to put a square peg in a round hole, using only parts available on board the ship.

A short time later, the stranded astronauts received a set of instructions from Houston. They named the device they built with the instructions “the mailbox” for its shape and the life-saving materials it delivered.

The kind of creativity that puts a man on the moon doesn’t just happen. It’s the result of an intentional effort to foster a creative culture. (In fact, to an uncreative world, such feats seem impossible. A poll in 2009 by the British periodical *Engineering & Technology* found that 25 percent of people believe the moon landing was an elaborate hoax, perpetuated on a Hollywood soundstage.¹)

In the buildup to the Apollo 11 mission, a NASA deputy director had approached a researcher named George Land. He had lots of applicants, he said. But measuring people by standard intelligence measures (that is, the conventional IQ test) wasn’t sufficient. He needed a way to select the people who would create the best solutions because they had unusually tough questions.

NASA's issue wasn't finding intelligent people. Their issue was finding people who could think differently and demonstrate the sort of ingenuity that could solve the sort of problem that plagued the aborted Apollo 13 mission. Land and his team developed an instrument to measure creative thinking, and NASA implemented it as an additional step in their candidate vetting process.

The test was a rousing success and, as a measure of employee performance, highly predictive for NASA. Afterward, a question remained for Land and his research crew. They had determined how to measure existing levels of creative thinking in prospective employees, but that didn't solve more fundamental questions. Is creativity innate, learned, or—perhaps—unlearned?

Since the test questions were simple to understand, they decided to give the same test to a group of young children. They administered it to a sample of sixteen hundred five-year-olds.

The results were astonishing. They learned that 98 percent of five-year-olds were what the NASA test described as “creative genius.”



The In Between

George Land and his team of NASA-contracted researchers decided to track their young creative geniuses over time. They turned their research into a longitudinal study and, five years later, retested the same group of students. Among the same group of children, now ten years old, there was a drastic change: only 30 percent were creative geniuses. Again, at fifteen years old, 12 percent were creative geniuses. Throughout the period of the study, and since, Land and his team tested thousands of adults, far past the flat line of statistical



analysis. They learned, with an average age of thirty-one years old, that 2 percent of adults are creative geniuses.²

In their famous study, Land and his team not only solved an important issue facing NASA leadership but also discovered a fundamental problem—one that plagues business, education, culture, and the life of faith.

Each of us was once a creative genius.



Somewhere along the way, though, we lost it—not entirely but to a significant degree. We may not be complete creative dolts. We can match an entree with a side dish, we can sometimes figure out when our phone’s GPS is lying to us, we can choose among twenty flavors of stationery at the store, and, if pressed, we can actually contribute an idea at a business meeting. But we’re far from what you’d call a creative genius.

As a creative director, I hear people apologize for the lack of creativity all the time. It’s sometimes their lead sentence: “Oh, I’m not very creative.” We like to refer to a “creative person” as some sort of special species possessing rare talent. We see ourselves as somewhere in between.

The archetypal image of creativity is the garage. Larry Page and Sergey Brin (Google), Jeff Bezos (Amazon), Steve Jobs (Apple), The Who, Nirvana, Walt Disney, Harley and Davidson, Hewlett and Packard—entire industries share the same opening scene of young, hungry rule breakers working out of their garage. Because of this, we think of the metaphor of the garage as the setting for innovation and the seed for great things.

The thing is, most of us no longer tinker in our garage. Most of us don’t even own a garage anymore. Instead, we own an attached

storage shed. One study revealed that 75 percent of American garages are so filled with clutter that they have no room to store an automobile.³ Instead of metaphors for creativity and innovation, our garages have become final resting places for the artifacts of our consumption.

Perhaps circumstances dictate our choices; perhaps we become impatient with waiting and uncertainty. When we party on the weekend or get away after work with music and a drink with friends, maybe what we're doing is trying to regain our soul because all day we've been trading it in for a paycheck.

***I don't want to work,
I want to bang on the drum all day.***

—Todd Rundgren

The problem isn't that most of us are incapable of creativity. Land's study and other scientific studies disprove the false dichotomy of creatives versus noncreatives. Creativity recovery isn't a switch to turn on, and to find our creative self doesn't mean we must drag the lake of our psyche, although this may be something you're inclined to do. Rather, creativity can be nurtured and developed. When we make the unexamined declaration that we are not creative, as most of us do, we rob ourselves of a powerful means of knowing and experiencing God's work in our lives.

Land's study is a scientific insight for what I believe is primarily a spiritual issue. We've lost our ability to create. 

This book isn't for the 2 percent of adults who are still actively engaging their creative genius all the time. This book is for the 98

percent—those of us who are former creative geniuses and those of us who want to recover the creativity and the sense of joy and engagement we have lost.

The Source

One way of thinking about the way we have distanced ourselves from creativity is this: we have lost sight of our creativity's source.



As creatures made in God's image, we are designed by God to be like God, and this means we're designed to create, not peripherally but as part of our fundamental nature. In other words, in the beginning, we are each given, as part of the warranty of being human, a harmonic calling, the melody of a set of good things to do with our lives. As an image or representation of God, when we create, we reflect the character of God and the glory of God. Our God-given creative passion is our unique art and the source of our fulfillment.

For the artist there is no distinction between work and living. His work is his life, and the whole of his life.



—Dorothy Sayers⁴

Each of us is made to be God's cocreator. And, as with any creative process, the work draws the workers together. When we create, we move closer to God; conversely, when we merely consume, we move further from God. To call someone, or yourself, uncreative is simply untrue. Our creativity problem is not that we don't have this supernatural power within us. It's that we have lost track of it. It's latent.



I believe that when we seek to become more creative, we're really seeking to rediscover our unique art. God intends, through the grace of faith in Christ, to re-create us: to reintroduce us to our identity as God's creatures. When we reclaim this original creativity, we become who we were made to be, whole and complete: images of God. Creativity and faith are kindred spirits. When we follow Christ, we become a new creation. And when, out of the wonder of this recovered identity, we create, our fulfillment and God's glory happen at the same time, and the result is great things that hopefully play a part in changing the world.



To be clear, this rediscovery isn't necessarily religious. Often, it's not. As Romans 1 points out, all of creation points to the glory of God. In other words, creativity can be those things Robinson and Torrance said—new ideas and solved problems. It can be a new look to a designer, a better solution to an engineer, an alternate strategy to an executive, a more organized calendar for a mom, or “adding value” to a business plan. Creativity builds, not destroys. It answers a question, helps someone, or expresses an idea. In all of these activities, when we create, we make wonder, to ourselves and to others who benefit from our work.



Creativity is not a luxury. It is essential for personal security and fulfillment.

—Sir Ken Robinson⁵

Most creative people have maintained, and relearned, a way of thinking (a philosophy), a discipline of living (a strategy), and a set of tactical practices that help them to do what they do. These are not

sacrosanct; indeed, we the 98 percent can learn them, increase our creativity, and rediscover our art. I believe there is a high correlation between rediscovering our creativity and overcoming a lack of engagement in our work and in our life. This book is about helping you find the melody of passions that is God's accomplishment in you.

We are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.



—Ephesians 2:10

The goal of this book is to help you know the story of your creativity: why you had it to begin with, how you lost it, and how to get it back. Each of us is called to a life of creativity: to know how we are made, to reclaim our passion, to learn the craft of creativity as an act of faith, and to surrender this act to God. My hope is to help propel you back to a trajectory of creativity. A creative life is fulfilling, productive, often successful, and usually harmonious—the kind of life we want.



How do we reclaim the wonder we're made to make? In order to understand creativity let's first turn to the group of people who get it best: children.