Oliver Sacks on the Three Essential Elements of Creativity

"It takes a special energy, over and above one's creative potential, a special audacity or subversiveness, to strike out in a new direction once one is settled."

By Maria Popova

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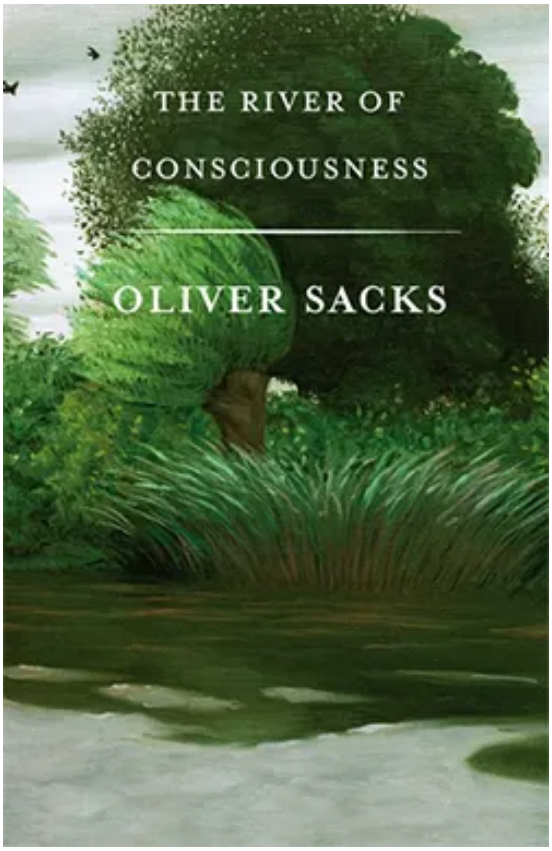

"And don't ever imitate anybody," Hemingway cautioned in his advice to aspiring writers. But in this particular sentiment, the otherwise insightful Nobel laureate seems to have been blind to his own admonition against the dangers of ego, for only the ego can blind an artist to the recognition that all creative work begins with imitation before fermenting into originality under the dual forces of time and consecrating effort.

Imitation, besides being the seedbed of empathy and our experience of time, is also, paradoxically enough, the seedbed of creativity — not only a poetic truth but a cognitive fact, as the late, great neurologist and poet of science **Oliver Sacks** (July 9, 1933–August 30, 2015) argues in a spectacular essay titled "The Creative Self," published in the posthumous treasure ***The River of Consciousness*** (*public library*).

Oliver Sacks captures a thought in his journal at Amsterdam's busy train station (Photograph by Lowell Handler from *On the Move*)

In his impressive handwritten notes on creativity and the brain, which became the basis of the essay, Sacks had enthused about — in two colors, underlined — the "buzzing, blooming chaos" of the mind engaged in creative work. But, contrary to the archetypal myth

of the lone genius struck with a sudden *Eureka!* moment, this chaos doesn't occur in a vacuum. Rather, it coalesces from a particulate cloud of influences and inspirations without which creativity — that is, birthing of something meaningful that hadn't exist before — cannot come about.

With the illustrative example of Susan Sontag — herself a writer of abiding wisdom on the art of storytelling — Sacks traces the inevitable trajectory of creative development from imitation to originality:

> Susan Sontag, at a conference in 2002, spoke about how reading opened up the entire world to her when she was quite young, enlarging her imagination and memory far beyond the bounds of her actual, immediate personal experience. She recalled,
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> *When I was five or six, I read Eve Curie's biography of her mother. I read comic books, dictionaries, and encyclopedias indiscriminately, and with great pleasure.... It felt like the more I took in, the stronger I was, the*

bigger the world got.... I think I was, from the very beginning, an incredibly gifted student, an incredibly gifted learner, a champion child autodidact.... Is that creative? No, it wasn't creative...[but] it didn't preclude becoming creative later on.... I was engorging rather than making. I was a mental traveler, a mental glutton.... My childhood, apart from my wretched actual life, was just a career in ecstasy.

[...]

I started writing when I was about seven. I started a newspaper when I was eight, which I filled with stories and poems and plays and articles, and which I used to sell to the neighbors for five cents. I'm sure it was quite banal and conventional, and simply made up of things, influenced by things, I was reading.... Of course there were models, there was a pantheon of these people.... If I was reading the stories of Poe, then I would write a Poe-like story.... When I was ten, a long-forgotten play by Karel Čapek, R.U.R., about robots, fell into

> *my hands, so I wrote a play about robots. But it was absolutely derivative. Whatever I saw I loved, and whatever I loved I wanted to imitate — that's not necessarily the royal road to real innovation or creativity; neither, as I saw it, does it preclude it.... I started to be a real writer at thirteen.*

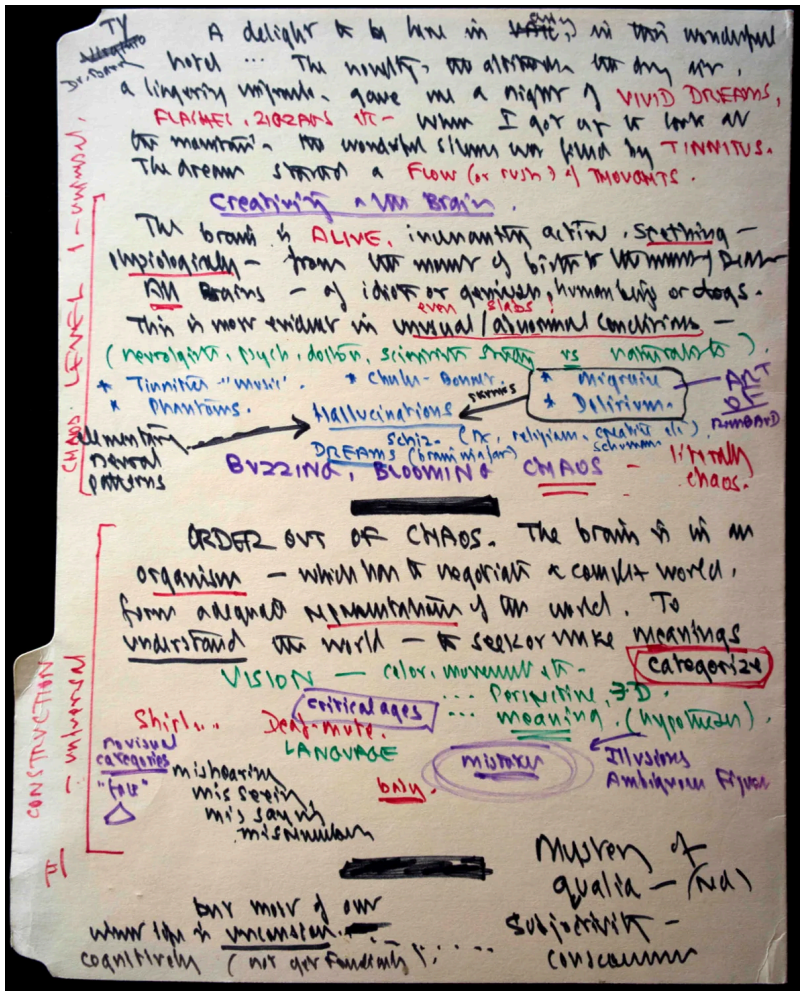
Sontag's experience, Sacks argues, reflects the common pattern in the natural cycle of creative evolution — we learn our own minds by finding out what we love; these models integrate into a sensibility; out of that sensibility arises the initial impulse for imitation, which, aided by the gradual acquisition of technical mastery, eventually ripens into original creation. He writes:

> If imitation plays a central role in the performing arts, where incessant practice, repetition, and rehearsal are essential, it is equally important in painting or composing or writing, for example. All young artists seek models in their apprentice years, models whose style, technical mastery, and innovations can teach

them. Young painters may haunt the galleries of the Met or the Louvre; young composers may go to concerts or study scores. All art, in this sense, starts out as “derivative,” highly influenced by, if not a direct imitation or paraphrase of, the admired and emulated models.

When Alexander Pope was thirteen years old, he asked William Walsh, an older poet whom he admired, for advice. Walsh’s advice was that Pope should be “correct.” Pope took this to mean that he should first gain a mastery of poetic forms and techniques. To this end, in his “Imitations of English Poets,” Pope began by imitating Walsh, then Cowley, the Earl of Rochester, and more major figures like Chaucer and Spenser, as well as writing “Paraphrases,” as he called them, of Latin poets. By seventeen, he had mastered the heroic couplet and began to write his “Pastorals” and other poems, where he developed and honed his own style but contented himself with the most insipid or clichéd themes. It was only once he

> had established full mastery of his style and form that he started to charge it with the exquisite and sometimes terrifying products of his own imagination. For most artists, perhaps, these stages or processes overlap a good deal, but imitation and mastery of form or skills must come before major creativity.



A page from Dr. Sacks's wild and wondrous handwritten notes on creativity and the brain.

Curiously, Sacks points out, many creators don't make the leap from

mastery to such “major creativity” — something Schopenhauer considered in his incisive distinction between talent and genius. Often, creators — be they artists or scientists — content themselves with reaching a level of mastery, then remaining at that plateau for the rest of their careers, comfortably creating more of what they already know well how to create. Sacks examines what set those who soar apart from those who plateau:

> Why is it that of every hundred gifted young musicians who study at Juilliard or every hundred brilliant young scientists who go to work in major labs under illustrious mentors, only a handful will write memorable musical compositions or make scientific discoveries of major importance? Are the majority, despite their gifts, lacking in some further creative spark? Are they missing characteristics other than creativity that may be essential for creative achievement — such as boldness, confidence, independence of mind?

> It takes a special energy, over and above one's creative potential, a special audacity or subversiveness, to strike out in a new direction once one is settled. It is a gamble as all creative projects must be, for the new direction may not turn out to be productive at all.

Much of the gamble, Sacks argues, is a kind of patient gestation at the unconscious level — something Einstein touched upon in explaining how his mind worked. Echoing T.S. Eliot's insistence on the necessity of "a long incubation" in creative work, Sacks adds:

> Creativity involves not only years of conscious preparation and training but unconscious preparation as well. This incubation period is essential to allow the subconscious assimilation and incorporation of one's influences and sources, to reorganize and synthesize them into something of one's own.... The essential element in these realms of retaining and appropriating versus assimilating and incorporating is one of depth, of

> meaning, of active and personal involvement.

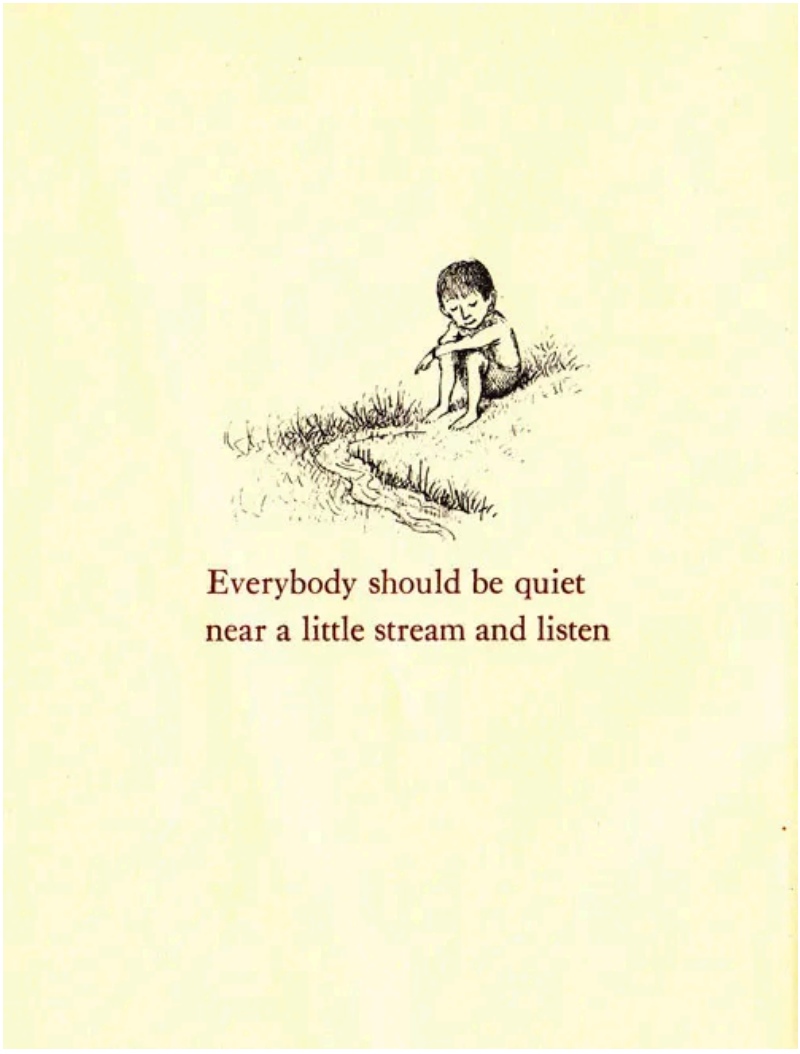


Illustration by Maurice Sendak from *Open House for Butterflies* by Ruth Krauss

He illustrates the detrimental absence of such a gestational period with an example from his own experience:

> Early in 1982, I received an unexpected packet from London containing a letter from Harold Pinter and the manuscript of a new play, *A*

Kind of Alaska, which, he said, had been inspired by a case history of mine in *Awakenings*. In his letter, Pinter said that he had read my book when it originally came out in 1973 and had immediately wondered about the problems presented by a dramatic adaptation of this. But, seeing no ready solution to these problems, he had then forgotten about it. One morning eight years later, Pinter wrote, he had awoken with the first image and first words ("Something is happening") clear and pressing in his mind. The play had then "written itself" in the days and weeks that followed.

I could not help contrasting this with a play (inspired by the same case history) which I had been sent four years earlier, where the author, in an accompanying letter, said that he had read *Awakenings* two months before and been so "influenced," so possessed, by it that he felt impelled to write a play straightaway. Whereas I loved Pinter's play — not least because it effected so profound a transformation, a "Pinterization" of my

> own themes — I felt the 1978 play to be grossly derivative, for it lifted, sometimes, whole sentences from my own book without transforming them in the least. It seemed to me less an original play than a plagiarism or a parody (yet there was no doubting the author's "obsession" or good faith).

In a testament to his uncommon empathic might and his endearing generosity of interpretation in regarding others, Sacks reflects on the deeper phenomena at play:

> I was not sure what to make of this. Was the author too lazy, or too lacking in talent or originality, to make the needed transformation of my work? Or was the problem essentially one of incubation, that he had not allowed himself enough time for the experience of reading *Awakenings* to sink in? Nor had he allowed himself, as Pinter did, time to forget it, to let it fall into his unconscious, where it might link with other experiences and thoughts.

The unfortunate playwright seems to have embodied the lamentation which

poet Mary Oliver so beautifully articulated in her meditation on the creative life: *"The most regretful people on earth are those who felt the call to creative work, who felt their own creative power restive and uprising, and gave to it neither power nor time."*

Sacks points to three essential elements in a creative breakthrough, be it a great play or a deep mathematical insights: time, "forgetting," and incubation. More than a century after Mark Twain declared that "substantially all ideas are second-hand, consciously and unconsciously drawn from a million outside sources," Sacks — who had previously written at length about our unconscious borrowings — adds:

> All of us, to some extent, borrow from others, from the culture around us. Ideas are in the air, and we may appropriate, often without realizing, the phrases and language of the times. We borrow language itself; we did not invent it. We found it, we grew up into it, though we may use it, interpret it, in very individual ways. What is at issue is not the fact of

> “borrowing” or “imitating,” of being “derivative,” being “influenced,” but what one does with what is borrowed or imitated or derived; how deeply one assimilates it, takes it into oneself, compounds it with one’s own experiences and thoughts and feelings, places it in relation to oneself, and expresses it in a new way, one’s own.

Complement this fathom of ***The River of Consciousness***, thoroughly resplendent in its totality, with physicist and poet Alan Lightman on the psychology of creative breakthrough in art and science, then revisit Bill Hayes’s loving remembrance of Oliver Sacks and Sacks himself on what the poet Thom Gunn taught him about creativity.