CREATIVITY: EAST AND WEST

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INTRODUCTION

The concluding years of this century enables us to assert that a significant breakthrough in the evolution of human consciousness has occurred since the turn of the century. This breakthrough is nothing but the gradual emergence of a virtually irreversible paradigm shift from the narrow mechanistic (reductionistic) view of reality to a broader organismic (systems or integrative) view of reality. A new vision of reality (of the universe and humankind's place in it) has emerged from a variety of disciplines such as metaphysics, quantum mechanics and the neuro-sciences.

This new vision is based on the awareness of the essential inter-relatedness and interdependence of all phenomena — physical, biological, psychological, social and cultural — transcending the current disciplinary and conceptual boundaries. The "new science of reality" ushered in by this paradigm shift will be the bedrock on which will rest the cultural, social and spiritual transformation of humankind that is destined to occur in the coming century. Consequently, the redesign of social, educational, political, economic and other institutions on conceptual models based on this view of reality and the universe will be the central challenge facing humankind during the early decades of the next century. This conference, wherein have gathered some of the best minds from both the Eastern and Western hemispheres, I am confident, will provide the necessary catalytic spark for such a process of redesign.

The emergence of this new science of reality, which I will be referring to as "systems view of reality" has necessitated a radical reexamination and redefinition of the fundamental beliefs, constructs and axioms hitherto held inviolable in every field of human thought and action. As the new paradigm that is upon us deepens and grows in the consciousness of humankind, its full and detailed implications on our concepts of knowledge, ways of knowing and valuing are myriad.

CULTURE AND CREATIVITY

Culture can be defined as a general system of ideas or beliefs that determine the "pattern of thinking, feeling and acting" and is held sacred and shared by the members of a group,

institution, society or a nation. This pattern is transmitted zealously to oncoming generations for the purpose of not only maintaining its viability but also sustaining and nourishing its harmonious development. It is obvious, then, that to maintain the quality of this "sustainable development", such a "pattern of thinking, feeling and acting" be as close to the emerging world view or the "new science of reality". Historically and traditionally, the world community has been divided as "East" and "West" because of the seemingly different "world views" held by the societies in these two hemispheres. Post modern revolution, in both the world of science and the world of humanities, is compelling these "two cultures" to take a new look at what they mean by reality and reexamine their own world view. The new epistemology that has been ushered in, as a consequence of this new understanding of human reality, has already had a significant impact on our concept of human potential, intelligence and creativity.

The concept of creativity and ways of its nurturing is undergoing a radical reassessment in both these cultures. As Getzel and Csikszentmihalyai (1975) rightly point out, two closely intertwined conceptual stands have influenced, and will always influence, the understanding and definition of creativity. One is our conception of who we are as human beings and the other is the nature of human intelligence.

Without doubt, the reason for the lack of coherence in this area of study can be attributed chiefly to the differing paradigms on which these two concepts rest. In the West, the concept of who we are as human beings and the nature of human intelligence (and consequently the understanding and study of creativity) has rested on and still rests to a large extent on an exhausted reductionistic paradigm. In the first place, in the reductionistic framework, understanding human nature and behavior is based on a combination of the homeostatic model of self-maintenance and the drive theory of behavior.

The Western mind set, shaped and nurtured for over three centuries by the mechanistic Newtonian-Cartesian model of the universe (a reductionistic paradigm) sees creativity from a revolutionary perspective. It is seen as a cognitive trait marking radical departure from cultural norms and tradition, and is measurable and quantifiable. The concept that intelligence is fixed, that it can be tested, measured and denoted by a single number, is chiefly a byproduct of the narrow reductionistic paradigm. Creativity was also considered a mental trait analogous to intelligence that can be tested and measured. The emergence of creativity as an autonomous focus of study, as Getzel (loc. cit.) succinctly remarks, was strangled by "the reigning concept of intelligence, buttressed by the manifest success of intelligence testing". However, numerous studies across the globe in several cultures established clearly the negative correlation between the IQ and creativity. This alone necessitates that creativity has to be studied as a single and separate attribute of human potential. Little wonder that the study of creativity and its emergence as an autonomous field of investigation has been stymied by the "intelligence movement".

Notwithstanding, due credit has to be given to the pioneering work of Dr. Guilford, presaging an early paradigmatic change in the study of creativity in the Western mind. This is

clearly reflected in his historic presidential address to the American Psychological Association in 1950. "If we are to fathom the domain of creativity," Dr. Guilford asserted in his address, "we must look beyond the boundaries of the IQ"(Guilford, 1950). For the first time the process of "divergent thinking" was given credibility as the most obvious indication of human creativity (Guilford, 1977). Later in this discussion, I will come back to the contributions of Dr. Guilford to Japanese early childhood and kindergarten education.

In the Eastern mind set, more particularly in China, thinking springs from the deeprooted Buddhist and Taoist philosophies of culture. This acts as a compass or a template to negotiate the challenges of contemporary society. Logical rigor and empiricism while not negated is transcended by the role of imagination and intuition as an integral part of human endeavor. Importance of inspiration and imagination in scientific thinking is central in the Eastern view. The fundamental desire for harmony rather than conflict arising out of individual raggedness and competitive spirit appears as a main spring of the natural philosophy of the Eastern mind set (Smith, 1981). The process of thinking is valued more than the products of thinking.

From this process or integrative (intuitive and imaginative) view of reality, creativity is seen from an evolutionary standpoint as a quality of the human spirit almost inseparable from tradition but over time developing innovative but deviant, sustainable and enduring patterns of interactions with the world. Howard Gardner's experience in studying creativity in contemporary Chinese society validates such a view (Gardner, 1989).

FOSTERING CREATIVITY

Models of fostering creativity in the educational systems of these cultures is derived from these seemingly opposite views of creativity. In general, children in the West are encouraged individually to be more original, non-traditional and innovative during their early development. The acquisition of basic skills, rigor and discipline is left for the later years. In the East, children, as a group, are expected to acquire the basic skills in a variety of domains, together with "the discipline of the mind", as quickly and thoroughly. They then aspire for divergent thinking and imaginative ways of processing the world around them. Creativity is instilled in the community as a whole in a subtle way over a period of time.

THE JAPANESE CONTEXT

Of all the Eastern countries, no other society has totally assimilated and incorporated the fruits of scientific and industrial revolution in its way of life so rapidly as the Japanese society. Drawing heavily from the basic tenets of the traditionally so called "Oriental philosophy" from China, Japan has creatively woven into its society's fabric the scientific empiricism and the intellectual rigor of the Western mind set. They have imaginatively bridged the dichotomy of the two cultures.

Instead of paying lip service to the cardinal axiom that the future of a country lies in the investment in the children today, the Japanese culture has taken this seriously. Here, in the raising of children, fundamental patterns of thought and action are laid down in processes as important to the understanding of society as genetics is to morphology. What takes place in Japanese nursery schools today is actually the formation of Japanese culture and society circa 2020.

No other contemporary society has the world's most advanced systems of public childcare in the industrial world where there is a high proportion of working mothers as in Japan. The role of early socialization and the central role of planned orchestration of optimal environments during early critical periods of human development has been amply demonstrated in this vast Japanese experiment in the post war years (Rohlen, 1989; Tobin, 1989). As an adjunct and desirable complement to school learning, both the Kumon method of teaching mathematics and the Suzuki music curriculum have surpassed the expectations of even the most severe critics of these methods, who deride them as "drill and kill". They now acknowledge the value of diligence and perseverance instilled in the early years. Controlled diversity is the central theme of present day early childhood philosophy (Boocock, 1989). The Japanese have been often accused of being "copy cats" to be successful in the product-driven world economy. The value of divergent thinking as a process that is germane to creativity is being well translated into the pre-school and kindergarten curriculum in several institutions across the nation. The children in these environments are exposed to both structured and open systems of learning where the processes of inquiry and imagination are fostered equally. For example, the Structure of Intellect Model for fostering creativity pioneered by Dr. J.P. Guilford has taken deep roots in early training in these schools to the extent that Guilford, I have a feeling, will be honored as the "Edward Deming" of Japanese education in the coming years.

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