



*About
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He is the author or co-author of twenty-four plays and musicals. In 1974, he received the Charlotte Chorpenning Cup from Children's Theatre Association of America.

Robinette collaborated with E. B. White on the stage version of Charlotte's Web and recently completed the musical version with composer Charles Strouse. Robinette has also dramatized The Paper Chase and Anne of Green Gables. His children's plays have been presented by Lincoln Center, Goodman Theatre, and Honolulu Theatre for Youth.

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Some Thoughts on Creativity and Teaching



Joseph Robinette

The word “creativity” for me is not very different from words such as “cooking” or “fishing” or “whistling.” It is an activity that expands on a set of learned or acquired precepts. The cook uses the basic recipe, then adds a touch of this and that to improve the flavor. The fisherman puts a dab of peanut butter on the doughball in hopes of improving the chances of a catch. The whistler adds a little tremolo between the third and fourth measures to improve the tune, especially in the shower.

Creativity does not exist in a vacuum. The only true creativity that we know of came a few billion years ago when, we are told, a very large bang created a whole lot from very little. Since that very brilliant, incomprehensible moment, everything has come from something else. As King Lear says, “Nothing will come of nothing.” It seems to me, then, that the broader the base of knowledge, the greater the potential for the peak of creativity.

While bits and pieces of creativity may come spontaneously from lightning bolts of the gods or from some primordial goo that suddenly appears at our fingertips, the bulk of it emerges from learning math, reading poetry, memorizing

the elements, reciting the states and their capitals, listening to old people tell stories, watching a rodeo, going to Iowa and making love in the kitchen while the parents are watching television in the living room. In short, required academic—and life—experiences. That’s the groundwork, anyway.

While I agree that we as educators may not be able to teach creativity per se, I think we can help students learn to be creative. Just as we can’t teach people to write novels or compose operas or paint masterpieces, we’d better be doing something in that classroom other than merely assigning chapters and giving tests. It is my premise that creativity *can* be encouraged, developed and rewarded and that we can inspire or direct or prod or kick butt and send out a more creative student than came in. We can at least crack the door a little. The student will more often than not open it the rest of the way himself.

In many areas of classroom creativity, I find myself more the facilitator than the “teacher.” And I prefer it that way. I find that students often learn from each other more than they do from the instructor. A simple exercise I use in a class is this: I hold up a pencil and announce, “This is a pencil.” (My students are remarkably restrained in complimenting my brilliance.) I then ask, “But what else is it?” I proceed to hand the pencil to the first student, instructing him that he may respond or pass the pencil on and take a shot at it later.

Often, the pencil goes through two or three hands before someone says, “It’s a lever for prying open a paint can lid” (creative-practical) or “It’s a toothpick for a giant” (creative-whimsical) or “It’s a spear for a pygmy warrior” (creative-militant). Once the ice is broken, the glaciers descend, and the students who passed during the first go-around practically salivate to retrieve the pencil and pronounce it “a baton for Thumbelina” or “a thermometer for Pinocchio.” They’ve seen the light—not from me but from their peers. If I begin the exercise by calling the pencil, say, a rolling-pin for Lilliputian pie crusts, the students would suddenly be in compe-

tion with me. And that would intimidate, rather than challenge, them. So I let them do the whole bit. I simply pass the pencil around and let them do the “thinking and suggesting” (the pencil is, after all, a State of New Jersey issue).

A footnote here is that I don’t feel educators must be super-creative individuals themselves in order to promote creativity. Just as the best ballplayers rarely make the best coaches or managers, the most successful creative artists are not necessarily the best teachers of that art. What the good managers and good teachers do, however, is to get the best out of their players and students respectively, and that, perhaps, requires a special kind of creativity, one of process as opposed to product. The coach/teacher gets the players/students in a position to let them get the job done.

The question arises, perhaps, as to whether—and how much—we should espouse creativity in the college classroom. Shouldn’t it have been dealt with in the early years? At home? In elementary school? At camp? At Bob’s Hobby Shop? Well, yes, of course. But creativity, like sex, is going to happen, so we should make it part of the educational process at all levels instead of letting it flourish behind the barn.

Underlining all this, of course, is the basic question: Why do we create? Why must we create? In an intriguing one-act play, *Welcome to Andromeda*, a quadriplegic, despairing of his condition and attempting to effect his own mercy killing at the hands of his nurse, says—as best as I can recall—“All the books, all the poems, all the words ever written can be reduced to a single syllable—‘Help!’ ” I enjoyed the play, but I disagreed with the line. I think all the words ever written, all the music ever composed, all the paintings ever painted, all the performances ever performed, all the creative actions ever acted can be reduced to two syllables—“I’m here!”

Why does a Beethoven create a symphony? Why does a kid spray-paint the side of a church? I contend: For the same reasons—to assert, “I’m here.” And why must we say, “I’m here”? Perhaps because we’re not sure we should be here.

Perhaps we are like anxious children watching the searching eyes of the teacher. We have an answer—but we're not sure it fits the question.

I'm here. I deserve to be here. I belong here. I will validate my existence. I will write a symphony. I will knit a sweater. I will play a tune. I will design a deck. I will start a fight. I will form a gang. I will paint a slogan on the side of a church. I will—in one way or another—leave my footprints, however briefly, on the sands of time. And how I do that is how I perceive my universe; how I do that is how I perceive myself.

Maybe the playwright was correct. But maybe I am, too. Perhaps it's three syllables after all: "Help—I'm Here!" Would I be a better teacher if every student who walked through my classroom door uttered those words, "Help, I'm here"? Maybe we couldn't have gotten the kid who painted the slogan on the church to write a symphony, but maybe we could have helped him validate his existence in a different way. Paraphrasing the Godfather: "We should have come to him sooner."

My obligation is to all my students, but I feel particularly responsible for that non-major who has contact with me—and perhaps my department—only once in his college career. Whether the course be Public Speaking, Experiencing Acting, Voice and Articulation, or another General Education option, my job is to "sell" that student on the values of what I teach and let him know what my values are insofar as they fit the context of the subject at hand. And the value of creativity crosses the board. That's why I push back the desks—literally and figuratively—as often as I can and explore old things in new ways. I like it when I overhear a student say to another, "Hey, guess what I did in class today?" Maybe what he did was not of major significance in the total scheme of things. But that's okay. As Thomas Kinsella, past poet laureate of Ireland once wrote, "The desire of man to cry out to others is rarely accompanied by the gift to make that cry matter to others." So while the student in

my Oral Interpretation class may not have made his cry matter to others, he made it matter to himself. And that's a start.

—*Excerpts from remarks presented at the Fine and Performing Arts Faculty Forum Series, April 27, 1992, at Rowan College of New Jersey.*