

## **Creativity: How You Get Out of the Family Alive** **by Russ Barnes**

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Creativity. Some welcome it as a blessing from the gods. Others consider it downright diabolical.

Two scenes illustrate why.

Picture the first: a Time-Warner executive, clarifying his hiring preferences, admonishes his charges, "Stop bringing me 'creative candidates.' Please! Bring me average people. People who cry in the movies -- or go bowling on Wednesday nights! Okay? Anything, anybody. But spare me 'the creatives.'"

The sentiment behind this scene reflects a familiar stereotype that short-changes creativity and creative people.

But now look at the second -- another hard stereotype expressed this time in a New Yorker cartoon:

A little girl stands in a bedroom and, with some consternation, says to her little friend, "And then, as soon as I had carved out my niche, they went and had another kid." (Bruce Eric Kaplan, *The New Yorker*, October 30, 1995, p. 86.)

The sentiment in this one has not yet solidified into creativity per se, but may indeed prepare fertile ground for creativity. Both scenes are rife with raw competition . . . and anxiety. The first scene (which actually took place) illustrates a defense of the status quo. The second scene (which probably happens all the time) dramatizes the beginnings of grappling with the status quo. In contrast to the first scene, the second story is about the family, rather than the workplace.

Give him credit. The executive in the first scene has a point. Creative people are sometimes hard to work with. The executive takes it personally. Creative people are usurpers. They change the rules on you mid-stream. They steal your familiar place and sometimes your serenity. Their "gift" seems to come wrapped up in the same package with arrogance and ineffectiveness. What they have to offer sounds nice. Creativity is like motherhood and apple pie, but it is not needed. The executive has located, sadly, some truth in this -- but also much error. Both that truth and that error have dogged the creative enterprise for ages.

The little cartoon girl is a tougher character than the executive. She is dismayed. Her familiar place has been usurped. She's jealous. It's not the wiles of some creative sibling that has snagged her spot. It's rather the arrival of a new-born who plops down, it seems, by means of some diabolical whim of nature. The little cartoon girl has experience with these upstarts, though. After all, she herself had once "carved" out a comfortable niche

within her family. Who's to stop her from carving again?! Avoidance is not an option. "Just watch me," her body language warns.

This article scrutinizes a behavior pattern -- creativity -- a "mechanism" utilized by a child to find a place within the family insuring her survival. It will describe an alternative behavioral pattern, one of avoidance and defense, practiced by a child to protect an existing, privileged place in the family -- also insuring survival.

Secondarily, this article addresses the anxiety which accompanies either choice -- of the "creative mechanism" or of its avoidance -- and how the anxiety attendant upon either one may be carried over, sometimes fruitfully, into adult social systems.

Keeping an eye on the thwarted little girl in the cartoon and the exasperated Time-Warner executive in the human resources department may provide a greater awareness of creativity as both personal choice and formal discipline. Such an awareness must include how the creative discipline matters in the struggle for life; how it is not only nice, but needed.

Creative discipline is made up of a bundle of techniques, practices, and exercises that help the individual and the human enterprise thrive on what is called "the economy of nature." Many efforts are afoot to make a place for the creative discipline alongside other disciplines to provide a human arsenal of survival tools. These efforts issue from a fertile variety of disciplines, and they are all worth surveying for their contributions toward clarifying the role of creativity in the nature of things human. Two disciplines in particular deserve special attention: first, biology as it illuminates survival and adaptation issues and second, psychology especially as it clarifies the dynamics of human family systems.

#### A Pie with Seven Slices . . . and Eleven Children to Eat It

Biology informs about the hunt for territory and limited resources. Harvard Ph.D. Frank J. Sulloway explains how birth order and family dynamics shape and make possible "creative lives." Sulloway, currently a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, is an historian of science and a former MacArthur Fellow. He makes the case based on statistical research and Darwinian analogy, that siblings, when they come into the world, "must compete for parental investment." (Frank J. Sulloway, *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives*, 1996, p. 86.)

All animals face a world with limited resources. On the level of the family, so the analogy goes, the world is like a pie with seven slices and eleven hungry children. Those who fail, often enough, to obtain their "slice" will eventually disappear from existence. It's easy to understand how anxiety, if not fear, enters the picture.

In nature's economy, every animal must find a place. Each must acquire his or her own exclusive territory. And this must be sought out shoulder-to-shoulder with competing animals who may be looking to acquire exactly the same territory. Nature's pie has only a finite number of slices. Furthermore, according to Sulloway, in the human family the

finite resources sought after turn out to be none other than parental attention, a crucial asset in early life. Is it any surprise then, Sulloway inquires, that sibling rivalry is ubiquitous behavior?

Even a "yes" answer doesn't end the story here, however. "Strategy" now enters the narrative. Strategy is a means for acquiring finite resources: territory, food, sexual partners, social dominance, the attention of parents. "Throughout organic nature," Sulloway points out, "diversity is a useful strategy that allows species to compete for scarce resources." (Sulloway, p. 85.)

Diversification as a survival strategy requires divergence. Sulloway notes that Charles Darwin hit upon the "principle of divergence" on a carriage ride during the 1850s trying to resolve a stubborn puzzle of evolution. His question: Why do species diverge in character as they evolve -- since evolution does not require divergence?

"The solution," Darwin wrote, "is that the modified offspring of all dominant and increasing forms tend to become adapted to many and highly diversified places in the economy of nature." (Sulloway, p. 85 quoted from *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, 1985.) In other words, the more flexible the organism becomes in interaction with a changing and diversifying environment, the more it becomes successful.

To Carve Out a Niche, Siblings Strategize

Winning competitions with a rival does not always guarantee success.

Successful survival strategy in nature often depends on adaptation to a new condition within the "economy of nature," or what some today call the ecology. What alternative survival strategies do is to identify new slices to add to the pie. A child, for example, may shun the family farm and send money home from the big city. A slice of parental attention often follows. Resources lying around unused, or even invisible to a pedestrian imagination, are recognized and employed to establish a new niche. Pet rocks were once marketed in the United States. Silicon Valley utilizes unused sand lying about the beach to make computer chips.

Biologists refer to this sort of survival strategy as "adaptive radiation." "One of the best-known examples," Sulloway says, "is Darwin's finches, whose habitat is the Galapagos Islands." On one island, some of these finches lacked food. However, in their interaction with the environment and by chance mutations, some grew a larger beak. This beak is capable of cracking seeds (food!) that finches were never before able to eat.

Once these "revamped" beaks appeared, the size of the available "pie" grew for this species of birds. And they ate at the same "table" with divergent finch species who dined on a different source of non-competitive food. Before the beak change, the birds lived in what is called the "principle of competitive exclusion." This principle holds that no two species can coexist in the same habitat if their ecological requirements are identical.

"Character displacement" is the phrase used to describe species living together in non-competitive niches. Diversification makes coexistence possible.

And so nature is often creative. What Sulloway provides is an analogy comparing the natural world to the operation of human social systems. The adaptive "creativity" of nature comes about through fortuitous happenings. Human creativity often is a more conscious, strategic enterprise. Different in that respect from the rest of the natural world, human creativity shares many dynamics with it.

Biologists, incidentally, warn against the error of making casual analogies between the animal kingdom and human social systems. Asked about the scientific reaction to his use of the Darwinian analogy, Sulloway noted that "Stephen Jay Gould saw the analogy as a demonstration of the power of environment which is lacking in many sociobiological comparisons." (Sulloway Interview, October 14, 2003)

All human children make a choice between competitive exclusion and character displacement. Like the little girl in the New Yorker cartoon, they either protect their dominant niche from usurping siblings, or they create a new, non-competitive one to attract parental investment. Sulloway includes a "birth order" factor in this equation. First-born children tend toward conservative protection of their niche while later-born siblings maneuver themselves into innovative, unoccupied niches. Both approaches, Sulloway claims, represent "an effort to survive childhood." (Sulloway p. 86.)

#### Jealous Triangles and the "Anxiety of Progress"

Whichever of these strategies gets employed in childhood, points out Michael Kerr, MD, a psychiatrist and Director of the Georgetown Family Center in Washington DC, "the same strategy is usually carried over to such social systems in adulthood as the workplace." (Interview, October 8, 2003.)

The Georgetown Center bases its therapeutic approach on the pioneering family systems work of the late psychiatrist, Murray Bowen. Bowen devoted his life to the belief -- based on clinical evidence -- that individual psychology must be understood within the fundamental social system of the family, an approach now known to the psychotherapeutic community as Bowen Family Systems. (This work, according to Kerr, required Bowen "to unlearn psychoanalytic theory.") Consistent with Sulloway's insights, Bowen came to see that "differentiation" within family systems -- divergence and variation -- "minimizes family anxiety," and increases all around role fulfillment.

Bowen's special use of the term, "anxiety," adds a psychological dimension to an understanding of Darwinian adaptation and survival. In Bowen's theory, anxiety is a complex condition related to, but less primitive than, fear.

Anxiety itself can be motivational. "Take two people," requests Kerr. "Add a third and you get an emotional triangle." Jealousy, "a feeling state that informs everyone about the reality of a situation," informs all members of the triangle. Next comes anxiety. "What can arise is either an anxiety of regression or an anxiety of progress," according to Kerr.

A triangulated social system may experiment with both kinds at once: suppressing innovation "to keep the social system stuck on the one hand, and promoting role innovation, on the other, to liberate the triangle from stagnation."

So -- creativity? A blessing or a curse? From these perspectives, it depends on your survival strategy. Or your sibling's or your client's. If you, like the hiring executive, exhibit the character traits common to the family's first born, you will protect the status quo -- and creativity will seem to be a curse. If, however, you are like the little cartoon girl who worries about the arrival of a new sibling, you may begin to demonstrate a kind of "anxiety of progress," the kind that can change the whole scene and lead to a less anxious, and more fulfilling life.

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Russ Barnes, ACA Director of Public Affairs, is a playwright and journalist who works from Bethesda, Maryland. His web address may be found at [home.earthlink.net/~rbarnes7/Bio.htm](http://home.earthlink.net/~rbarnes7/Bio.htm). Russ may be reached at [rbarnes7@earthlink.net](mailto:rbarnes7@earthlink.net).