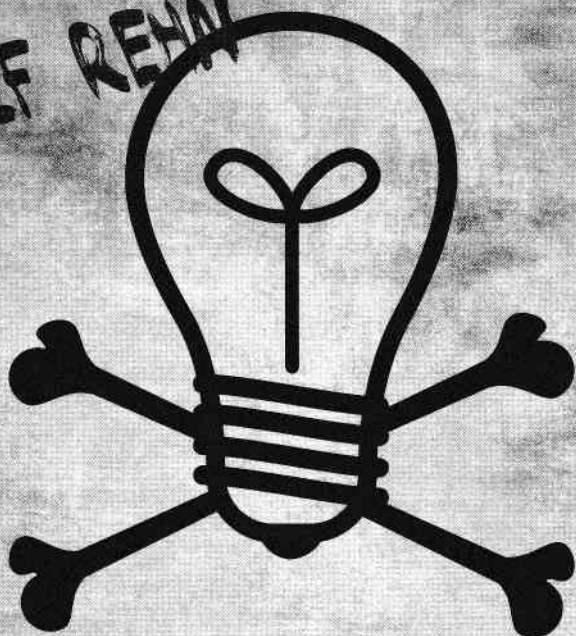


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ALF REHN



DANGEROUS IDEAS

WHEN PROVOCATIVE THINKING
BECOMES YOUR MOST VALUABLE ASSET



Marshall Cavendish
Business

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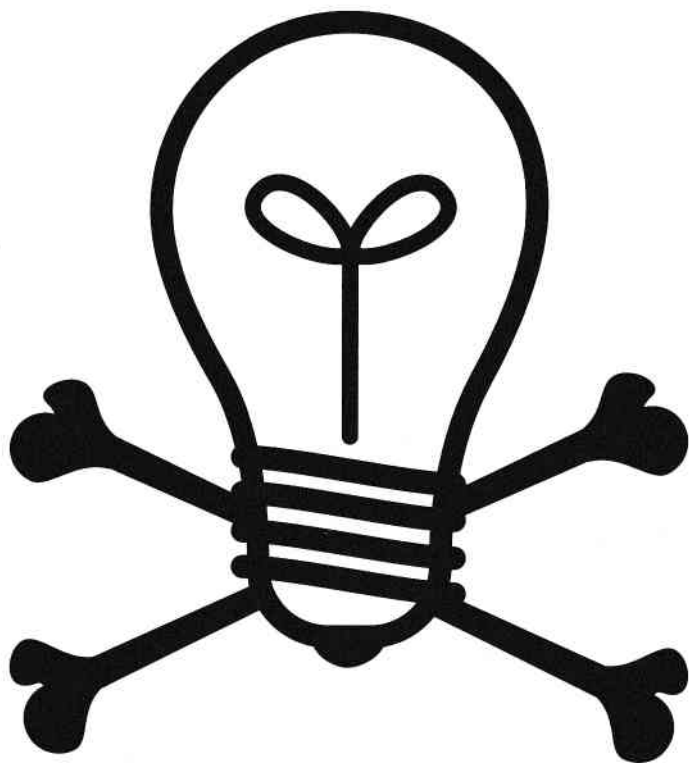
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PART I

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**COMFORTABLE
THINKING AND YOU**

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“NOT ANOTHER BOOK ON CREATIVITY?!?”

It is the customary fate of new truths to begin as heresies and to end as superstitions.

—Thomas Huxley

Let's get the obvious facts out of the way, before we get down to the important stuff: creativity is important. We need it, desperately. It's the driving force in the contemporary corporation, a central part of the modern economy and critical for achieving individual excellence. Some even claim that it is necessary for humans to achieve balance and well-being. So of course it's important, and precisely because it is important this will be a book about how creativity can be developed, how companies can improve by working on their creative potential and how innovation actually happens.

But do we need yet another book about creativity? In my library I have hundreds of books on creativity, creative organizations, creative economies, innovation, business ideas and so on, *ad infinitum*. I have longwinded theoretical ones, short colourful ones, books that explain how creativity can make you rich, books on how creativity can save the world and books that mainly consist of pretty pictures. On my shelves I can find books on how creativity works in groups, on how to lead creative people, even books on how to raise a family with the help of creativity. Creative cooking, creative fitness, creative problem-solving, creative marketing – it's a never-ending list.

So what in the world could have prompted me to write one more book about creativity? There's a simple answer, but it's also a little tragic. Having read more than a hundred books on creativity and innovation, one thing became very, very clear to me: books on creativity are suffering from a serious lack of creativity. Succinctly put, they are far too similar, full of examples that are similar and over-used, and tend to reuse exercises in a way that might be funny if it was meant to be ironic. But it isn't. Books on creativity don't kid around, and take themselves so seriously that they at times become the very definition of uncreative. Book after book lines up the same examples, the same exercises, the same pompous statements. If there is one thing that the literature on creativity needs it's creativity, and plenty of it.

Just Say No!

As an example, take those goddamn nine dots.... I guess there must be one or two people who've never seen this (I think there are tribes in Borneo that haven't, and I envy them), but by now it must be a pretty small minority. In brief, the exercise starts when the author, in his most arrogant tone, presents a picture where nine points are arranged in a 3x3 matrix. The reader is then supposed to connect these by either four straight lines drawn without lifting the pen, or some variation on this sad theme (my favourite being the one where you insist you have to do this with a single straight line, which you can do by cutting out the dots and arranging them in... a straight line). The exercise is trivial, overused, and not even particularly good for developing creative thinking. In itself it is completely uninteresting, but the frequency with which it is constantly reused is fascinating.

THIS SPACE IS FREE FROM TRIVIAL CREATIVITY EXERCISES

Figure 1.

If you look at what the books are really trying to say with this kind of exercise, it becomes obvious that they are put in to convince the reader that creativity is a kind of secret, a mystical form of knowledge that should be transferred from the more enlightened author to a slightly dim reader. There is in fact a very distinct sense of religious fervour in much of what is written on the subject, to the extent that it even scares me a little. Nor do I like the high-and-mighty attitude that colours much of the discourse: "Here's a riddle. Can you solve it? No? I thought so. Come here, my limited friend, and I'll show you just how silly you are..." (Later on I will do the exact same thing, but with the assumption that I'm no better, and maybe much worse.)

These exercises are a form of ego-boosting for the author, and not really ways to say anything interesting about creativity. And this becomes particularly clear when you notice that the same exercises are used in book after book after book! Just as I finished typing that sentence I hollered at my son, asking him to go to my bookshelves and get me three books with creativity in the title, just to test this out. Out of three randomly selected books, two featured the image with the nine dots.

The third, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Creativity*, did not – but it has neither pictures nor exercises. It does make up for this, however, by repeating several other things that are endlessly recycled in books of this type.

Write Your Own Creativity Book!

If it was only a single exercise that was repeated over and over again, one might excuse this. However, the fact is that most books on creativity look more-or-less alike, if with some modifications. In fact, you might even say they all just repeat a single model from 1926. This was the year when a gentleman by the name of Graham Wallas (1858-1932) created a basic model for the creative process, one with four simple steps:

- Preparation
- Incubation
- Illumination
- Verification

Since then, this model has been modified by hundreds of authors, through permutation after permutation after permutation. Some add a step or two, mainly by subdividing one of the above, and most give the steps new names. And yes, people might add a few things as to how preparation is supposed to be done, or talk about the importance of action in verification. They might even arrange the steps in a circle, so that verification is followed by a new round of preparation. Still, they keep to the script.

If they can do it, *so can you!* Just use the basic model above, give the steps funky new names, add a phase (whatever, it doesn't really matter), and put it in a nice, new colourful model. Why not in the shape of a shark? See, *you too can be a creativity thinker!* I mean, why not? A lot of people have already done it... Once you have your model set out, spice it up with a series of examples and exercises. If you can't think of new ones, just use the same ones you find in other books – everybody does it. Hey presto, you're finished! Now all you need to do is to compare your creation with a book you might already have on

your bookshelf.

Did you find one? Let me guess: first the author spends a few pages arguing that creativity is really, really important. Then he or she runs through a series of chapters that outlines a series of things you need to do: you have to define the problem, preferably in several ways, and collect a mass of ideas and inputs while you're doing this. In other words, do what Wallas called preparation. Then you need to realize that creativity needs space, cannot be forced, and that naps are good. This is what Wallas called incubation. At some point, this will result in new ideas, even though the book will be quite vague about this bit. Wallas was refreshingly honest, and called this an "illumination", as he knew damn well that he really didn't understand it either. The ideas then need to be tested, evaluated, acted upon, that is, they need to be verified.

It's been the same pattern, over and over again, since 1926. A lot has happened since then, nations have risen and fallen, new industries have bloomed while others have gone bust, but the creativity books look a whole lot like they did way back when.

Creativity, Hallelujah...

It is thus a tragic but true fact that books about creativity are not particularly creative, and the reuse of exercises is only the most visible symptom of the greater problem. This, by the way, is an important part of how we've tamed and neutered creativity into something taken for granted, a series of anecdotes to tug at your heartstrings. Most, if not all, books on creativity spend a lot of time yammering on about how important the subject is, how creative companies are more successful than uncreative ones, and how much happier you could become if you'd just dedicate yourself to creativity. There is something fanatical in the way they nag at the reader about this, in how they *demand* that people have to accept creativity into their lives. Oh, and how they more or less implicitly state that those who aren't prepared to do so are failures and losers.

Here, the religious tone that is present in much of the creativity industry comes very much to the fore. You either get it, or you're a lost soul.

Organizations that haven't seen the light are wrongheaded, and should be either converted or humiliated. And you're not supposed to question creativity. Never, ever, ever are you encouraged to do so. The righteous missionaries of this particular cause really can't give an answer when you ask them if things couldn't work with a little less fervour and frenzy, but neither are they ready to accept any criticism or competing perspectives. For most people writing on the subject, creativity is just as holy as even Jesus, Buddha or Allah, so you can be critical about everything as long as you're not trying to be creative about creativity. It's an all-encompassing faith where creativity is the great unquestioned good.

The problem is that I can't really accept this. I am a born sceptic, and this also means that I take sceptical view of the notion of creativity. I don't accept the argument that creativity can solve all problems. I don't think that an organization with only creative people is a good idea, or even possible. Call me a cynic, but I'm not even convinced that creativity is always a good thing. On the contrary, I can easily think of many situations where creativity is a really bad idea. *But creativity has become a church*, and in it this kind of blasphemy is not accepted, so as one of the heretics of creativity I have found myself crankily standing on the sidelines of a field I really want to like and enjoy. But this is not only a bad thing, and as Art Kleiner argued in his book, *The Age of Heretics*, we need such thinking to develop what we have.

A heretic is someone who sees a truth that contradicts the conventional wisdom of the institution — and remains loyal to both entities, to the institution and the new truth. Heretics are not apostates; they do not want to leave the "church". Instead, they want the church to change, to meet the truths that they have seen halfway.

—Art Kleiner

Reclaiming Creativity

So, as a heretic, I love creativity. This might sound odd coming from someone who has just spent a few pages to harshly criticize it, but the

fact is that I am enamored and fascinated by creative thinking, creative people and creative organizations. The problem, however, is that I refuse to accept simplified and reductionist descriptions of this strange, odd, messy, contradictory, mischievous and chaotic field. For me, this is something very different from the altogether proper, well-behaved and clean-cut thing that one is normally served in books on creativity. For real creativity isn't something neutered and servile. Instead it is unabashedly improper, frequently dangerous, and often more than a little uncomfortable. Many of the people trying to sell creativity (and we are talking about salesmen here), seem to see it as a kind of jazz – nice to listen to, often a little surprising but rarely shocking. Something like conceptual muzak, inoffensive and devoid of soul. I prefer to see it a little differently. To keep to my metaphor, I see real creativity as the kind of music adults get annoyed at kids for listening to – punk, death metal, gangsta rap. Different, radical and frequently offensive.

And so to this book. It is based on my work on creativity and innovation over the last decade, work conducted both in practical collaboration with corporations and organizations, as well as in the more conceptual sphere. Over the years, I've become increasingly dedicated to injecting a little creativity into the discussion on creativity and innovation, and to finding ways in which these concepts can regain a little of the unbridled energy that is supposed to define and infuse them. As I see the world, creativity is not made of just pretty things and nice sentiments. Instead it is something that can be dirty, mean and raw – *something that actually changes things*.

Creative Delinquent

So, creativity is an unkempt delinquent that picks his nose and puts his dirty shoes up on the table, not a well-mannered youth with bright eyes and a winning smile who retells popular anecdotes so that the audience will like him. As I see it, creative people have enemies, and this isn't only a good thing, it is how things are supposed to be. Why? Because if everyone likes what you say, you can be damn sure there's