



Jump Start Your Creativity: An Experiential Presentation

General Session: Speaker

Tuesday June 5th 2012 9:30am – 10:15am

Paepcke Auditorium Walter Paepcke Memorial Building, The Aspen Institute

Speakers:

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Transcription:

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ALEJANDRO FOGEL: Buddha was the first one that created a sand mandala. The Buddhist monks continue with the tradition. What they do is get together by the water, by the river, lake, sea, and build this incredibly beautiful mandala made of sand. They spend a lot of time; they go out of their way to find the right, exactly, perfect color. They spend weeks by the mandala, building it. When they feel, “Okay, this is the best thing we can possibly create, this is all we can give and this is the perfect piece of art we want to give the world,” they sweep it into the water, they destroy it.

In Buddhism there are many layers of meanings and in this case, what they love is that - they love the process. They love working together, spending all those weeks, all those days together, gathering the colors, putting it together on the ground and coming up with the most beautiful thing possible. Then they get rid of it.

We should think that if we are going to create a product, we should love the process. We should love the process of creating it – the process that takes us to the product. Some mandalas start with a little piece of paper. I love paper. When it turns to creativity, when the time comes and I’m about to create, I love paper. It’s my favorite thing. Don’t get me wrong, I love technology, but paper, you can’t really replace it. It has so many advantages. You can’t get email in the background, there’s never something distracting you. This piece of paper was given to me by a seven year old boy, Dillon, this morning and he called himself a creator. That’s our next generation – the creators. I’m telling you that I love paper and every time I look at a piece of paper, every time I’m about to start creating, I do it every morning religiously – 10 minutes, just 10 minutes. Every time I look at it, I get a stomach ache. I get so anxious. Dr.

Friedman was talking about that particular moment when that happens – the anxiety moment. So when that happens, what do I do?

[Alejandro crumbles piece of paper]

It's just a piece of paper. What's important is inside us, not the surface where we are going to work. Would you like to try it?

[Audience members crumble pieces of paper and toss]

Thank you. Thank you. You've been waiting for this moment. I can see it. Thank you so much. Now it looks like we've been working like crazy for so long. We know now what to do when we face a piece of paper.

How do we tap into our creativity? How do we get those ideas?

Carl Jung, a philosopher, psychologist, came up with a theory of the collective unconscious. He was saying that our unconscious was part of a really large one; all of our unconsciouses are taking over the universe like a puzzle, so we are connected. All of our unconsciouses are forming part of that puzzle that connects us. So if that's true, there's a direct link between us, between all those images, all those images floating around, ideas are passing by and it's up to you, up to us, to catch them. How do we catch them? One of the things we do is we give people license to steal. We want you to steal. We want you to take ideas, but here's the thing – we don't want plagiarism, we don't want people to just copy an idea. We want transformation and that is one of the keys of creativity – transformation. Creativity – transformation.

Leonardo da Vince used to look at the wall of his studio and come up with all his ideas of paintings, drawings, invention. They were humidity stains, they were changing in the seasons, and in his notebook he says, "The only thing I have to do is copy those stains on the window." A little bit like when you were little, looking at the clouds and you would say, "that's a house" and your friend would say, "no that's a cow." That kind of thing – we are such complex individuals, we see so differently and we have the capacity to transform and it comes so naturally.

I love Moby Dick. It's my favorite book. I love also to go to the houses, places, where people I admire lived or spent time at. We were teaching in Massachusetts and I heard that Melville's house was there. One of Melville's houses, so I ran to Melville's house, I wanted to see it. It's now a museum. The grand floor is just a normal museum and the incredible thing is the second floor. They left it just as Melville left it before he moved to his next house. What they did is they left the furniture in the same position.

It was this little table, his table, and his chair. He was looking always through the window and through the window, this little window; you could see the Greylock Mountain. One morning, he did what he did every day, sit down, look through the window, and instead of seeing Greylock, he saw the whale. It was a lightning bolt and in that moment, Moby Dick was created. He saw Moby Dick.

Joan Miró, a wonderful artist, one of the geniuses of the 21st century, every time he was about to create, he got a panic attack. One morning he was painting, the canvas was behind him because he couldn't even look at it, and suddenly he turned and he saw a star. That's what he drew and he realized that the canvas wasn't empty anymore, there was something there, and that – just that little thing – allowed to him to start painting and never stop. He died when he was 92 and really happy.

I want to make sure that you understand that – all these creators I just mentioned – they failed. They failed so many times. And Shelley is going to tell us about it.

SHELLEY BERC: Not going to talk a lot because when Susie and Sallie were talking about what we would do here that would be a little different, we're going to have some of you, all of you, exploring a little bit of your own imagination and your own creativity. But I do want to say a few words to make that a little easier and sometimes a little calmer. What Alejandro was saying about failing is so important. One of our favorite quotes in the world is, "Fail. Fail Again. Fail Better." Those are the words of Samuel Beckett on receiving the Nobel Prize of literature – the secret to his great work. It's a very simple, but complex statement. One of the beauties of that statement actually is the rhythm of it. And one of the things we find out when we start to create is there – as you've been hearing from our scientific colleagues – there are times when you have to go really slow and you have to be really sheltered, and other times when you have to be very rigid, very sharp and very focused in a more analytical way. Now, composer John Cage said that creativity and analysis should never be done at the same time – they need their own space. Many creative people disagree with that. I happen to live by it.

One thing about creativity and why you are hearing so many divergent opinions is that we have different personalities, and to access our creativity, we have to understand a little bit of what kind of person we are and what brings out the deepest part of ourselves. What Beckett was saying – going back to "Fail. Fail again. Fail better" – he's saying you're going to make mistakes. You're going to make huge mistakes, but if you say, "I'm never going to get it. Leave it for someone else to do," you're never going to find out what your potential is. And worse than not finding out what your

potential is, you're not going to serve the yearnings of the heart that most people have who have a creative outlet.

Now the other thing about failure is it helps build the strength of your ego, right? Some of the dumbest ideas, if you look at the beginning of certain inventions you go, "impossible – this is ridiculous." I'll give you an example – Steve Jobs. He said that his design inspiration for a computer was a Cuisinart. I mean, can you imagine if you went to Macy's and you see a Cuisinart and you go, "that's it – that's going to transform communication and learning." It's impossible. But he had a very strong ego and in the Isaacson's book, you almost want to strangle him for that ego. You need it. You need to develop – with all the sensitivity that creativity takes – you need to develop the skin of a lizard.

That's what Beckett was really saying, "Fail better," that last statement is totally optimistic, it's totally inspirational and it means you keep getting up. Like John Kao said in the clip with Magic Johnson, how many times he failed. We also have to know that sometimes when other people think that we're failing, we're developing something new that they don't understand, and sometimes, unfortunately, for a long period of time, we don't understand. We just know it sticks with us. You have something that you say, "I know it doesn't work, let's get rid of it" and it keeps coming back, keeps coming back to you. That means you need to hold on to it and say, "okay, I'm going to watch it grow." It may take all my focus, but there is something valuable there that's really new, but it needs my nurture, it needs my attention. It's like the ugly child that only a mother could love. And those are the ones that often become the masterpieces.

This is our first time with all of you and it's been fascinating to see what this profession can give to people. When it comes to the imagination and the jump-starting of creativity, you absolutely need all of the qualities that spa and wellness creates. You need relaxation; you need somewhere where you think you're not among the enemies of your life, meaning stress. You're among friends, people that think it's okay for you not to be in the middle of stress all the time. That is really actually kind of great – that you don't like stress, that you don't want to feel it 24/7. In a way, it's a place to escape and unlike many people, I'm all for escape. I think escape is where we get our great ideas. If you think about children, children are very, very creative, there's no doubt about it. And they escape a lot. As a matter of fact, their escape is a lot more important than the things we think are important like going to school. Now they'll get through school stuff so they can go and create and make worlds and put the worlds together in ways that we have never thought of because we're so busy doing what we're supposed to do. To be creative you have to be a little bit naughty. You've got to be a little rebellious. You've got to be doing things that keep you going. It's also very

helpful to have a band of rebellious people around you. Now I'm not saying that you don't need analytical chops to do your work as a creative person. You do, but they come, in my opinion, in a much later stage. You've got to get the ideas flowing. And as a matter of fact, the interesting thing about analysis sometimes is the rebellion against it.

The time when the heroes of creativity have left their world, they've left their companion in creativity and gone off on their own, doesn't necessarily mean they weren't good at what they were doing; it doesn't even necessarily mean they thought they weren't good at what they were doing – they needed to go and develop their own aesthetic. That's why they did it – they really didn't believe that what was going on was so great. To be creative, you've got to get a little bit angry. You get angry, you say, "that's nonsense. Yeah, I don't have my ideas straight, but I still think that's not the way so I'm going to find another." And that's where you have to get really strong because people are going to say, "no, that won't work." How many times a day do we hear, especially from ourselves, "it won't work" 24/7? That's not a good way to go about getting your imagination to work for you.

I like to sometimes think about imagination as a separate entity. This person that gets to live with me or that I get to live with. And that person doesn't like to be told 'no' all the time because the analytics take a while to work out. Sometimes creativity comes like this (claps hands) – you have an idea, that idea has probably been working in, over your lifetime, associations. You can't shut these things down too soon. The big problem for a lot of companies is that we don't have the equivalent of an experimental lab. We don't have Bell Labs. And most great ideas are from having the time and space to think, to make mistakes, to yell back and forth with your colleagues.

There's a wonderful book out about Bell Labs and what that brought to the table of science and many of the things we take for granted today. We did a panel yesterday and what was very interesting were the questions that were asked - the wondrous, intelligent questions. One of the main concerns is, can we learn to be creative? There were many answers – yes, no, create environment, create prompts and stimulus. And the one thing that I was thinking about after this discussion is that there have been so many amazing ideas. And what I was thinking about was that one of the best places to learn your creativity is to remember as children – we take our imagination for granted. We all have it. Do you know one child that doesn't have an imaginative spirit, that doesn't say the most extraordinary things? Of course you go, "Oh yeah right," but then you go, "Wow – that certainly is a different way of intuiting the world." If we can remember how we were imaginative as children, we can recapture it as an adult and use it in a way and ask the questions that an adult must ask of that imagination creativity. It's always seemed a terrible waste to me that something we can come into

life with – imagination and creativity – it’s probably a survival mechanism because the more creative, the more flexible to change you are, the better your chances of survival when Saber-tooth wants to come and eat you. So if we’re born with something, and the first five to six years, we craft it – you look at a two year old and they’re sticking everything in their mouth and they’re also trying to take it apart. They’re really trying to figure out how all of their senses interact with this thing and also how it works. Especially boys, they want to take everything apart and then they can put it together. We’ve seen the results of that.

The question I ask all of us and including me, why does culture ask that as we become more specialized we give our imagination up? Not only do we give it up, but we make fun of people that use it. I think that at the age of 10, if someone says something that isn’t the right answer, everybody laughs at that person. And that person needs to have a very good, strong ego or very wise teachers to maybe take a kernel of the truth out of that “dumb idea.” The simplest ideas are often where our genius lies, and the other thing that I would hope that in this era of associative thinking and one of the great booms of technology, it allows us to very quickly put together desperate ideas. I would hope that it would encourage us to all be creators rather than consumers. We live in a world that is really fueled, economically fueled by consumers, and someday I hope that the people fueling the consumerism will not want us to be such passive consumers. We have the ability to do a lot of the creating that we buy, but there are not many people out there encouraging you to stay home and create your new business plan and your new possibility of forging out on your own, or to write the memoir that you’ve been dying to write or to learn to play piano when you’re 75. That’s considered frivolous, but it’s not considered frivolous to go out and go shopping at the mall. As a matter of fact, some presidents have told us it’s our American duty. I think the spa industry creates an environment, and it is a consumer environment, where we are encouraged to take steps out to our imagination, to come out to the people who we really are inside.

Picasso once said, “Well, you can leave off creating to another day, but that should only be the truth if you’re willing to die before planning to do what you want to do.” That’s a pretty heavy statement, but it’s true – it’s true.

What I’d like to do with you all now is a guided visualization. It’s just a fragment of how we enter into our creativity, but it’s a fragment that we can all do together and we can do it relatively quickly. There are a few ground rules and I’ll let you know what they are. First, don’t worry if you don’t follow the directions. Some of the best creative work I’ve ever done is when I didn’t understand the directions, but I didn’t sit there and go, “oh my God, I didn’t understand the direction,” and then I’m lost

because I'm in the part of my brain that wants to do everything right, is incredibly analytical and rigid and can't think, can't dream.

What I'm going to be asking you to do, and it's a little impossible, it's just an image I want you to put in your minds. I want you, as we write and draw, to let your hand move faster than your brain. It doesn't matter if what comes out has meaning or chaos because eventually everyone can make meaning, but to get all the images and ideas out – that's how you do linear thinking and linear thinking makes it very hard to do associative thinking and dreaming. So that's what we are going to be doing and I want you to think about this chain reaction – innovation, creativity, imagination, images. You can't have innovation without creativity. You can't have creativity without imagination. You can't have imagination without images. We are imagining beings. We are the only creatures so far that we know that create visuals in our heads without needing to see the real thing. The more that you can create a visual reality as much as a thinking reality, the more inspired you become. It isn't just your mind, it's your body.

I'm sure as time goes on, we are going to find that the brain is a meeting place of a lot of intelligence, but there are a lot of theories, a lot of kinds of intelligence going on in the rest of our body. When we create we use our bodies as well as our minds. We use our hearts and we use our souls.

I'm going to ask you to close your eyes and just take a moment to relax – get out the kinks, let all the thoughts and the things you are thinking about doing just disappear. Send them flying out of the room and just breathe. I think you all know how to breathe from your belly, slow, deep and make sure you really exhale. You want to exhale more than you breathe in (sigh). Keeping your eyes closed, we are going to go on a visual journey.

I want you to imagine that you can walk inside your chest. Your whole body can just go walking inside your chest and its floating over your heart. Imagine that you're just floating over your heart, looking down on it. I want you to imagine that you're a cryptographer, you're a maker of maps, and this heart that you see below you is an unknown continent. I want you to step down on that continent of your heart and have a walk around. Walk up the hills and down the valleys, the rivers, the oceans and start to explore this unknown continent of your heart. Feel the ground beneath it, beneath you, and the air.

As you're walking, a paper airplane falls by your foot from out of nowhere. You pick it up, you open it up and it's an e-mail from National Geographic magazine. The email says, "We have heard that you are exploring the unknown continent of your

heart and we want you to do a feature spread for our magazine so that others who come after you can also travel the continent of your heart.” And you accept the assignment. Being a cryptographer, you think the best thing to do, number one thing, would be to make a map of the unknown continent. So I’d like you to open your eyes and take out your pads and make a typographical map of the continent of your heart. Take these directions any way you intuit them. It doesn’t matter what they be, you can throw it out and make another one. Let your hands go faster than your brains. Just see what that feels like.

No matter what, don’t stop, even if you make lines you don’t like, colors you hate, and don’t forget to name some of the tourist attractions on your heart. It can be a literal heart, a metaphorical heart. Anytime you get lost just close your eyes and imagine that image of yourself walking the terrain of your heart. Feel how good it feels to have a color thing made by your hand on paper – the feeling of the flow that comes from the pencil on the paper. You can imagine that your hand is like a dancer. Take a few minutes to make sure you name some of the places on your heart. And I’m going to stop you. You can go back to this again later. We’re just creating the beginning of seeds here.

I want you to take a second piece of paper and I want you to write down two questions.

Question number one: How do I get from my heart to my brain?

Question number two: How do I get from my brain to my heart?

I want you to choose one of those questions. And when I say write about it, I want you to write so fast that you can’t think. Everything just comes out, very fast. You just need to answer one of those two questions and as you answer it, there are many ways you can answer it. You can answer it as a cryptographer – how are you going to get there literally, physically? You can answer it as a fairy tale – once upon a time I took a trip. You can answer it psychologically. You can answer it as if it’s a foreign, a scientific hypothesis. See which way works for you and it doesn’t matter if it makes sense, by the way.

I’m going to stop you again, you can go back and finish later, but you’ve got some fragments and sometimes fragments are far more useful to share than the finished goods. When we finish something its like, “here it is!” When we share fragments, the community is actually helping us shape our work because creativity is always part of being a community. It’s as much the inside expression as the outside sharing. It’s a very nice idea to just share fragments.

I'm going to ask you to turn to the person next to you or find somebody and share what you have done. Believe me this is going to be all rudimentary. Before you share, there's one little direction – you are going to whisper. You cannot share this work above a whisper, I'll tell you why afterwards. You're going to whisper to each other what you have done.

I'm going to interrupt you one more time. If we had more time, there are several other parts to this exercise, but I wanted you to get a taste of it. This is called guided visualization, there are many different kinds. They have been using it in wellness for many different reasons, but in some ways they are quite the same. Guided visualization, guided imagery, people use it before operations and they see that their blood pressure goes down, they are in better shape before the surgery. It's very powerful when we envision, it helps us adapt in the world and also transform the world.

You can create your own visualizations. This particular one, we thought we would do the heart because we have been thinking so much. So many wonderful ideas, my head aches! And we need some time to process so we really wanted to give you some downtime and some time to just feel the pleasure of a pencil and color. And then there is an analytical part to this exercise – how do I negotiate between what these two (points to heart and brain) symbolize? Not necessarily what they are physically – the soul in the heart and the intellect, which is in all of us. As adults we have to negotiate, as adults our most creative act is surviving, making a living and having fulfilling, exciting and inspirational lives.

So that's our creative feat, and the ability to go inside and also create your own visualizations. You can start to visualize something that you wanted to do that everything is against you doing and you'll do it. I don't think there is one person that hasn't had to come against incredible odds. One of the ways children learn to beat their odds is that they imagine. There is something good about being able – when you can't escape a situation – to live in one's imagination. I recommend it to adults when we reach walls that we can't go over because we have long, wonderful lives ahead of us, and to use our gifts, our inspiration, our imagination, our creativity, our ability to love and communicate, what more could we ask for?

I want to close on something that is very apropos to this conversation. This is a quote by a choreographer that many of you might know, Martha Graham. She really is the mother of modern dance and when she was interviewed, at one point she wanted to impress upon her audience how important it was not to just watch her company dance, but to involve the action of creativity – whatever that meant from making a quilt to a garden to finding a way to live your life – that it was absolutely vital for

human civilization to go forward. And this is what she said, “There is vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action. And because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique and if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is, how valuable, or how it compares to other expression. It is your business to keep the channel open.”

Thank you.