

Kayla's creative kitchen

Tom fumed. Another long day of useless paperwork, interminable meetings and now this. Stuck in traffic at 8:00 p.m. He'd be lucky if he got home before midnight. On an impulse, Tom decided to exit the highway and look for an alternate route.

As he left the off-ramp, he noticed a small bright sign winking in the distance. "Kayla's Creative Kitchen," it said. Well, at least he could get a sandwich and a cup of coffee to tide him over until he got home.

But when he opened Kayla's door, all he felt was disappointment. It wasn't much of a restaurant. Just a hole in the wall, really. A counter stretched across the small space, and behind it a trim, fifty-something woman — Kayla, presumably — sat on a tall stool.

"You're new," she said. "Can I help you?"

She must know all her regulars, Tom thought — or else, not a lot of people stop here. "Uh, yes. Can I see a menu?"

"We don't have menus."

They really were behind the times in this burg. "All right, then. I'll have a chopped egg sandwich and a coffee to go, please."

"We don't sell those."

"Just what kind of restaurant is this, anyway?" Tom demanded.

"It's not a restaurant at all," answered Kayla. "It's a kitchen — a creative kitchen. We feed the mind, not the stomach."

"What do you mean — some kind of day-care?"

Kayla laughed. "You could look at it that way, I suppose. But no. We bring creativity into the lives of people of all ages."

By now, Tom was starting to get interested. "Why would I want to do that?" he asked, smiling. "I'm not in the art department."

"I'll give you four good reasons," said Kayla. "First, the world is developing so quickly that you need to be creative just to keep up. Think about your work, for example. Only a few years ago we didn't have computers, fax machines, cellular phones — or cutthroat global competition. Today, people work in different ways and companies need to come up with new tactics if they want to succeed. Yesterday's approaches, techniques and practices just don't satisfy today's needs."

“Secondly, creative thinking provides us with fresh perspectives, novel experiences and innovative outlooks. It helps us grow. And when we transform creative ideas into reality, we fulfill our desire for self-expression.

“Third, creativity recharges our thought processes. The thrill of discovery injects fresh energy into our brains.

“And finally, creative thinking is fun. It’s a tonic for information overload and life’s pressures. Creativity grants us license to play.”

“But aren’t some people just naturally more creative than others?” Tom asked. “You could divide everybody at my company into two groups. Some people always come up with new and interesting ideas; the others only give you the same old thing. And what about great artists and inventors? I know I’m not as creative as they are.”

“Are you sure about that?” Kayla’s eyes twinkled. “But seriously — creativity lies at the heart of our humanity. Throughout history, the creative spirit has enhanced our lives. Think of how the invention of the wheel, the symphony and the computer improved the quality of human life. And if you spend any time watching children play, you’ll see that they are instinctively creative.

“And there’s something else. The magic of your creative powers is that the more you use them, the stronger they grow. And the more they build, the more you want to use them — whether you’re drawing up a business plan or planning a vacation.”

Tom thought back to his day at the office. His company could certainly use some new ideas, and as for him, anything that could inject new life into his work was worth a try. “OK,” he said, “So how do I start?”

Kayla handed him a stack of what looked like recipe cards. “Here. Follow these and before you know it, you’ll be cooking up first-rate creative ideas. And with a great deal of dedication and practice, you can make it to the very top: a five star mind.”

Tom looked at the small bundle. “That’s it?” he asked. “Just these cards?”

Kayla hesitated briefly. “Well, there is a book that goes with them, but I’ll have to charge you for that.” She smiled apologetically. “After all, I have to make a living too.”

Tom thought the book might come in handy. It had been a long time since he’d done any creative work — he might need a few extra tips. He paid for the book, thanked the woman and left.

As he started driving again, Tom suddenly realized that there was another question he should have asked Kayla. He pulled over, and looked for the bright, flashing sign in his rearview mirror.

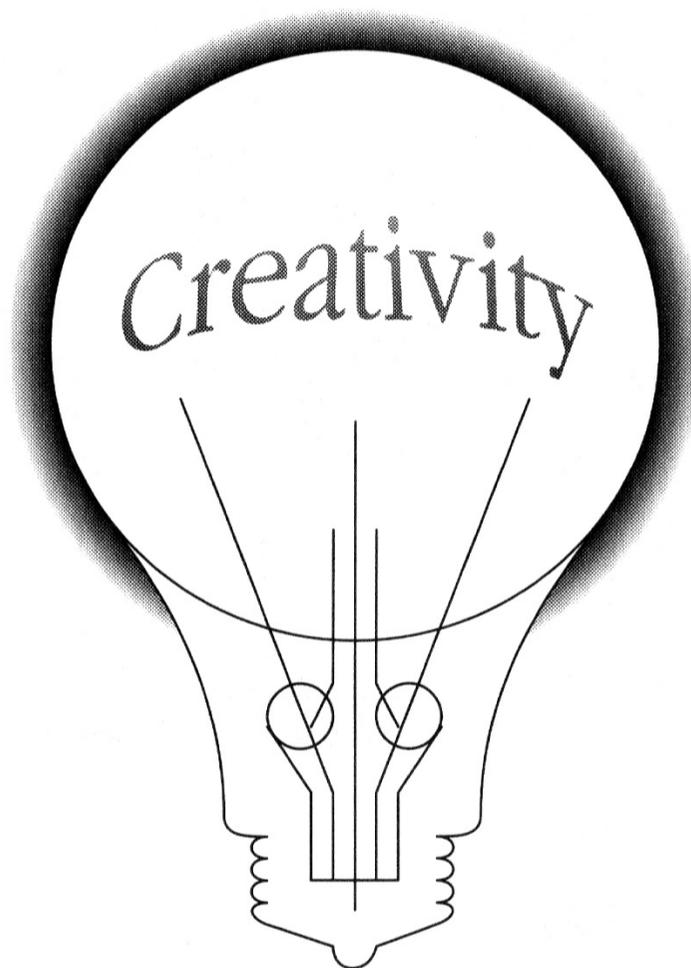
It was gone.

Chapter 1 — Food For Thought

The Creative Urge

WHAT IS CREATIVITY?

“TELL ME WHAT YOU EAT, AND I WILL TELL YOU WHAT YOU ARE.”
Briflat Savarin, English Gourmet



The question Tom never got to ask was this:

Just what exactly is creative thinking, anyway? Even Kayla might have had trouble answering that one.

Creativity is a familiar stranger. Trying to define it is like trying to capture a puff of smoke with your fingertips. Although we recognize creative imagination in everything from works of art to a balanced budget, we don't know how it works. And so we tend to imagine that creativity is a mysterious and uncontrollable burst of inspiration available only to a lucky few.

Nevertheless, thinking creatively is a common experience. We experience creativity every time a fresh idea pops into our minds. And we can summon creativity when we need it. Try the following exercise: your own creative abilities may surprise you.

BY ANY OTHER NAME

Take a few moments to relax, unwind and to collect your attention.

Let your muscles relax and your breathing become even and deep.

VISUALIZE A BRIGHT RED ROSE, DETAILED, VIVID AND STEADY,

AS IF IT WERE JUST IN FRONT OF YOU.

When your image is sharp and clear, alter a single feature of the flower.

Change the color to blue.

THEN CHANGE ANOTHER FEATURE. IMAGINE THE PETALS ARE MADE OF

MONARCH BUTTERFLY WINGS. WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE NOW?

Continue to alter the flower's features, one at a time. Make it larger. Or smaller.

Make the texture rough and hairy. Or smooth. Alter the shape of the petals.

Into lily pads. Or diamonds.

KEEP MAKING VARIATIONS, ALTERING YOUR IMAGE AS IDEAS OCCUR TO YOU, UNTIL YOU

ENVISION AN ENTIRELY NEW FLOWER, ONE THAT NEITHER YOU, NOR ANYONE ELSE,

HAS EVER SEEN BEFORE.

Be as outrageous or as subtle as you like, but give your mind the room

to envision something entirely new. What does the creative experience feel like?

What did you do while you were thinking creatively? How was this activity different from other types of thinking? Dictionaries don't help when it comes to answering this question. My dictionary defines creativity as originality, innovation, imagination and the act of bringing something new into existence.

Informal, everyday definitions of creativity give us a better gut-level understanding of the experience. We say that creativity is the ability to look at a problem sideways. A creative idea is a vision or insight, a moment of inspiration when thoughts suddenly fit together in just the right way. Creativity shows in a surprising solution to a problem or dilemma. Creative projects are elegant: they do the job using the fewest resources. Generally, we associate creativity with quality.

We speak of the visionary quality of creative people. They can look at the same thing as everyone else but see something different. They can look at the same thing as everyone else but see something different. An industrial designer looked at a clam shell and thought "lighting fixture." A fashion designer looked at the Eiffel Tower and thought "new hat." A chemist looked at a failed glue experiment and thought of sticky note pads, leading to the invention of "Post-It Notes." Creative people connect unrelated parts into a clever whole.

In short, "creativity" is a stew of concepts which have different meanings for different people. Nevertheless, creativity plays a role in everyone's life.

Five Star Mind will help you develop your creative gifts. It will encourage you to explore your creative spirit in new ways, to better understand what feeds your imagination, to increase your ability to invent new ideas and perspectives and to apply your creative powers to many aspects of life.

Like my last book, *Pumping Ions*, Five Star Mind is full of exercises, games and puzzles. There is also a new addition, my "Recipes for Great Ideas." All are designed to encourage you to participate in the creative process, rather than just think about it. We learn best by doing, and we do best by really putting ourselves on the line.

THREE KEY INGREDIENTS OF CREATIVITY

You could say that there are three key ingredients which make up the creative stew. The first ingredient is novelty. Creative action involves doing something new. The capacity to conceive and produce new ideas — from shaping a novel to making a pun to visualizing a brand new flower — is vital to creative thought. You focus on coming up with something different, rather than copying existing work. In this sense, creative ideas and products don't have to be unique; only novel for the creator.

Consider the flower exercise. If you are like most people, you probably found that the more you thought about the flower, the more variations you produced. You may have started out with indistinct images, which gradually became clearer and more detailed. Over time, you probably felt more choices occurring to you. You compared the imaginary flower with memories of real flowers. As ideas popped into your head, you tried out alternatives, and evaluated whether your creation was really new. If you really enjoyed the exercise, you may have become deeply involved in your work. And if, suddenly, you came up with a startling image — tiny blue-and-white daisies with bright red stamens, or a flower made from human fingers, or a Venus's flytrap with real teeth — you may have experienced a "eureka!" — a moment of insight.

But isn't there much more to the creative experience than visualizing a flower? Absolutely. The second key ingredient of creativity is value. You could visualize new flowers all day long — even brand new flowers — but if your vision cannot be realized in some way, your activity has served no purpose. The person who brings a new vision of a flower into tangible form — using paint, sculpture, words, computer animation, bricks, type, whatever — is the one who is called creative. Value makes people take notice of creative work.

To produce creative value, we use domain skills. Domain skills are abilities in particular compartments of life, such as writing, cooking, bricklaying and computer chip design. You're not going to be creatively productive as a painter unless you know about mixing colors or about the different kinds of brushes. To be really creative (in the sense of being able to produce innovative, valuable work), you've got to know the fundamentals in the area you're working on. That's not to say you can't have fun painting, but you've got to have basic skills before you're really productive.

The third ingredient is passion, what psychologists call internal motivation. This is the desire to do something for the sheer pleasure of it rather than for any prize or compensation. The opposite kind of motivation, external motivation, makes you do something not because you want to, but because you ought to. You seek future reward or avoid punishment.

Passion — in all its varieties — is a vital ingredient of creativity. Without passion, how could the artist dream, the entrepreneur take risks or the archaeologist travel to the dangerous site? Passion makes a person hungry for new ideas and experiences. Without the desire to penetrate, explore, unravel, contribute and tinker, the creative mind would not, and could not, push itself to new limits. But when we are emotionally involved and really thrilled, we can tap into our deepest creative resources.

Creativity happens when the key elements come together: novelty, value and passion. Every person has interests which stimulate their creative energy. What distinguishes creative geniuses is their attitude, commitment and willingness to dream.

EVERYDAY CREATIVITY

Many people don't see themselves as creative because they don't have a huge audience. They think that creative activities have to be the big "C" creative acts associated with writing a novel or composing a symphony. They tend to overlook the many ways in which they display flair and imagination in their own lives. Maintaining such a narrow view of creativity leads them to conclude that creativity is a rare trait belonging to poets and artists and geniuses. But the chef is creative when she makes a variation on a soufflé recipe. A brick-layer is creative when he produces a different pattern. A guard is creative when he does the rounds in less time. Often, the only difference between the big "C" and little "c" creative acts is the size of the audience.

CREATIVE CEREBRAL CUISINE



Anyone who has dabbled in creative activities — writing poems, composing jingles or even managing a project — knows that things don't always work the first time around. Getting an idea right is a process that can take time — sometimes a little, sometimes a lot.

At the beginning of the process, you have an idea of your idea, a partly formed notion of what you want to have happen. You're not entirely sure what you're going to come up with. (If you did, you wouldn't actually be creating something new.) To develop that idea, you think in different ways, sometimes mentally walking around concepts, other times focusing on single approaches.

No single description or approach accurately describes what we do when we create. Throughout this book, we'll be using a variety of metaphors and analogies to explore the many facets of creative thought. One metaphor is particularly powerful and expressive:

The "preparing a meal for the mind" metaphor highlights several types of thinking which contribute to creative ideas. As a mental chef, you plan a menu, visit the idea market and gather a variety of fresh ingredients — data and information. You clean and sort the ideas, separating the relevant from the irrelevant, then mix, blend and toss thoughts together, joining facts with hunches, speculations with observation. You cook, simmer and stew ideas, allowing juices and spices to mingle. In the end, if all goes well, you produce a well-cooked meal, ideas to nourish and satisfy.

We have many tools at our disposal in our mental kitchen — knives for peeling, cutting and separating ideas, bowls to mix them in, blenders that purée them and stoves and ovens that cook them to perfection. Preparing a meal involves knowing how and when to best use these tools.

In the following chapters, we will explore several fun ways to cook up ideas — transforming the raw ingredients of unrelated information into appetizing meals for the mind and senses.

Cultivate an appetite

Adopt a mind-set of exploration and discovery. Open yourself to new possibilities by being curious, by playing around, by focusing on what you don't know and by asking questions. Above all, give yourself permission to be creative.

Mix

Join, relate and marry ideas. Look for connections, make comparisons, relate your idea to others, invent metaphors and develop analogies. Trust in your capacity to be inspired by creating the conditions in your mind for new connections to take place.

Gather

Get the facts, figures and feelings which relate to your project. Collect many ingredients from many sources — local and foreign, exotic and commonplace. When you shop in the idea supermarket, remember to check for freshness.

Cut

Analyze ideas by dividing them into smaller parts. Determine the essence of problems or projects. Figure out qualities and quantities. Divide ideas into new categories. Chop them up so that you understand them in new ways.

Cook

Let your ideas simmer and stew. The doors to deeper creative experiences are persistence, hard work and drive. Focus your concentration by

developing an inner rhythm of expression and reflection, and by striving to reach the psychological state of “flow.” Know when to turn up the heat and when to let things cool down and marinate in their own juices.

Spice

Add accent and flair to your ideas. Have some fun by asking “what if” questions. Change contexts. Express your idea in a different mental language. Tell a story, draw a picture, make a model, formulate an equation or chart a map. Challenge your assumptions, break the rules and encourage that ever-present friend of creativity — luck.

Taste

Evaluate your creation. Determine how effective your ideas really are. Recognize the strengths and weaknesses. Know that ideas should appeal to the eye as well as the palate. When things go wrong, as they sometimes will, figure out what you can learn from the experience.

Digest

Take time to assimilate ideas. Are your ideas providing a balanced mental diet, or are you consuming too many mental sweets? Remember that a well-nourished intellect enjoys sustenance from all the mental food groups.

Each stage of preparing an idea — from gathering raw ingredients to tasting and assimilating the final product — represents a part of an ever-changing process. Unlike a recipe, the creative process cannot be a fixed procedure. By nature, creativity is dynamic and fluid, continually evolving and changing to fit the individual and the task at hand. But, by using the techniques explored in these chapters, you can create an environment in which creativity is likely to thrive.

Each chapter of this book focuses on a particular aspect of creative thinking. Although you may not necessarily apply every aspect to a given project or problem — you don’t bake a salad or toss a steak — the more ways you have to cook up ideas, the more innovative your ideas become.

The preparation and consumption of ideas — like the cooking and eating of food — never ends. Not long after we have finished a large meal, we become hungry, ready for more. In this way, cooking ideas is an act of renewal, a part of the never-ending process of learning, which we can apply to countless situations and circumstances.

MENTAL APPETIZERS

“ROUTINE IN CUISINE IS A CRIME.”
Edouard Alignon, French Gourmand

The ideas we cook for ourselves nourish our intellect and satisfy our thirst for knowledge. Information, experiences and concepts become the staples of our mental life and form opinions, values and knowledge. The ideas we prepare for others express our unique perspective and reflect our personal tastes. Good ideas can excite, encourage and make a real difference in a world cluttered with half-baked projects.

Tip one

Open yourself to the creative experience. Accept the risk of breaking out of patterns and trying something new. Expect to have fun.

Tip two

Don't disparage your own creative abilities. Your imaginative impulses have as much validity as anyone else's, whether you're a ballerina or a bricklayer. It's what you do with your thoughts that counts.

Tip three

The joy of cooking ideas, like the art of gastronomy, is consistently fulfilling and satisfying. Good eating is the very heart of the matter

“THE BEST WAY TO LEARN TO COOK IS TO COOK: STAND YOURSELF IN FRONT OF THE STOVE AND START RIGHT IN.”
Julie Dannenbaum, American Chef