

Creativity: Does It Have A "Shelf Life"?

Anne Durrum Robinson

For some inexplicable reason I have lately been privy* to several discussions on the shelf life of various products and substances. It seems that, no matter how careful the owners or overseers of such things may be, the product or substance eventually reaches its shelf-life limits. And then it is no longer dependable.

I have also read and heard about what might be considered the "shelf life of creative thinking". Many of the authorities are not too encouraging regarding the mental bounty of our later years. Some have even gone so far as to state that our creative peak is reached in mid-twenties and that the years after that have a distinct down-hill slant.

Possibly from a defensive standpoint, at 89 I don't subscribe to that latter theory. A number of years back the flight magazine of American Airlines had a wonderful series of photographs and short resumes of a couple of dozen American geniuses. I was intrigued. One of my workshops is titled "The 'I' and the 'Us' of Genius: so I sent for permission to use about 15 of the geniuses' pictures for transparencies. The list included:

- KARSCH: one of the finest photographers who ever existed. And who. took pictures of all these other white-haired wonders.
- HELEN HAYES: First Lady of the American Theatre .. who easily made the transition to film and TV. She won an Oscar, an Emmy and a Tony.
- HAROLD PRINCE: Producer/director who gave us THE PAJAMA GAME, DAMN YANKEES, WEST SIDE STORY, FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, CABARET, PHANTOM OF THE OPERA, the FOLLIES.
- LEO CASTELLI: A foresighted art dealer. Has an instinct for bringing the past into the future.
- JUDITH JAMISON: A great dancer makes great choreography possible. One critic compared her to "hurtling through the air like a spear plunged into the heart of space:"
- I.M. PEI: From Brooklyn to Singapore, Boston to Beijing, his architecture made him as famous as his structures. Sample: John F. Kennedy Memorial Library .. glittering pyramid in the heart of the Louvre.
- NORMAN MAILER: Trained as an engineer at Harvard but ended as a writer: The NAKED and the DEAD, THE DEER PARK, THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG. Won the Pulitzer, Polk and National Book prizes.
- AL HIRSCHFELD: His drawings of the great show figures of the past six decades have become legends in themselves .. have captured 6,000 personalities. Garbo, Groucho, Gershwin to name a few.
- GORDON PARKS: Beloved by all the Muses, Gordon Parks has been a film director (LEADBELLY), author of four novels, photojournalist for the Depression Era, choreographer and composer.
- JEROME ROBBINS: Went from the Broadway stage to the ballet with ease. JEROME ROBBINS BROADWAY was a wonderful distillation of his works.
- STEPHEN SONDHEIM: Reinvented the American musical. Wrote lyrics for WEST SIDE STORY, GYPSY and A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM. Then transformed the music for COMPANY, FOLLIES, A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC. SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE, INTO THE WOODS.
- MARY G. ROEBLING: Her grandfather BUILT the Brooklyn Bridge. She was the first woman chairman of a major bank, the first woman Governor of the New York Stock Exchange. Wonderful quote: "She must make men forget she's a woman between 9:00 and 5:00 .. and must make them remember she's a woman for the balance of her waking hours."

- TOM WOLFE: Almost as famous for his clothes as for his writing. THE ELECTRIC COOL AID ACID TEST, THE RIGHT STUFF, THE BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES.
- DAVE BRUBECK: Took what he knew about classical music and created something new - Progressive Jazz. JAZZ GOES TO COLLEGE ... JAZZ: RED HOT AND COOL ... TIME OUT.

And I was ecstatic to note that nearly every one of the dumbfounding dozen or more is (or was) white-haired. Furthermore, at that time, all of them were still involved in major creative projects: photography, cartooning, writing of novels, directing of Broadway plays, designing of architectural masterpieces. No indication of diminishing "shelf life" there. In fact, on their personal shelves, they were still being surrounded by photos, awards and accolades.

One of them in his 90's, was still driving in New York. That fact may indicate more bravado than creativity; however, it does show a determination to give the "grim reaper" a run for his money.

For nearly three decades I have studied and taught a lot about human brainpower. In fact my current "elevator speech" is "I am Anne Durrum Robinson and I help you make the most of your marvelous mind." And I am increasingly convinced that if we take unceasing care of our incredible mental capacities and do not fall prey to serious illness or accident, our creative abilities continue to grow and flourish.

I have recently completed two small books that give me personal pleasure and excitement:

DON'T JUST SIT THERE. GET ON A ROLL WITH YOGA: A small tome I plan to dispense freely. It has a page on deep breathing, a page on relaxation, a page on meditation, and about thirteen illustrated pages (for all ages) on yoga exercises that can be done in a wheelchair. I am in a wheelchair so I could sense a need.

THE HATCHERY An 8 1/2 x 11 inches book with cheery yellow cover and pages, spiral bound. The cover has an illustration of a chick coming out of the shell. The title page has chickens and hens of all sizes. There is a rooster at the page bottom "to wake your creativity each morning and to help your crow over your successes." Most of the book is blank pages for owners to record any words or ideas or longer inspiration that they wish to "hold for hatching". Later in the book is an incubator section for ideas that have more substance but still need some creative incubation time.

Neither of these volumes is world-shaking but I get a positive thrill out of thinking of them. So at this advanced age I'm ignoring shelf-life limitations and enjoying the fulfilling of any promising idea I may have.

We can't all be Leonardo da Vincis or Michaelangelos or Ansel Adamses but we can continue for a lo-o-ong time to go about our own inspired ways. And we can make sure we put our creative emphasis on our SELF LIFE rather than our SHELF LIFE.

* Having lived many of my years in small towns I'm still a bit hesitant to use that word in serious writing.

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