**[What Is Creativity? Cultural Icons on What Ideation Is and How It Works](http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2013/09/06/what-is-creativity/)**

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*Bradbury, Eames, Angelou, Gladwell, Einstein, Byrne, Duchamp, Close, Sendak, and more.*

“Creativity” is one of those grab-bag terms, like “happiness” and “love,” that can mean so many things it runs the risk of meaning nothing at all. And yet some of history’s greatest minds have attempted to capture, explain, describe, itemize, and dissect the nature of creativity. After similar omnibi of cultural icons’ most beautiful and articulate definitions [of art](http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2012/06/22/what-is-art/), [of science](http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2012/04/06/what-is-science/), and [of love](http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2013/01/01/what-is-love/), here comes one of creativity.

For **Ray Bradbury**, creativity was [the art of muting the rational mind](http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2013/08/22/ray-bradbury-day-at-night-1974-interview/):

“The intellect is a great danger to creativity … because you begin to rationalize and make up reasons for things, instead of staying with your own basic truth — who you are, what you are, what you want to be. I’ve had a sign over my typewriter for over 25 years now, which reads “Don’t think!” You must never think at the typewriter — you must feel. Your intellect is always buried in that feeling anyway. … The worst thing you do when you think is lie — you can make up reasons that are not true for the things that you did, and what you’re trying to do as a creative person is surprise yourself — find out who you really are, and try not to lie, try to tell the truth all the time. And the only way to do this is by being very active and very emotional, and get it out of yourself — making things that you hate and things that you love, you write about these then, intensely.”

Long before he became [the artist we know and love](http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/tag/maurice-sendak/), a young **Maurice Sendak** full of self-doubt wrote in a letter to his editor, the remarkable [Ursula Nordstrom](http://thereconstructionists.org/post/41698828032/in-1972-when-a-school-librarian-burned-a-copy-of):

“Knowledge is the driving force that puts creative passion to work.”

[In writing back](http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2013/06/10/ursula-nordstrom-letter-maurice-sendak/), Nordstrom responded with her signature blend of wisdom and assurance:

“That is the creative artist — a penalty of the creative artist — wanting to make order out of chaos.”

**Bill Moyers** is [credited](http://explore.noodle.org/post/53323730990/bill-moyers-pair-with-this-vintage-guide-to) with having offered a sort of mirror-image definition that does away with order and seeks, instead, magical chaos:

“Creativity is piercing the mundane to find the marvelous.”

For **Maya Angelou**, a [modern-day sage](http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/tag/maya-angelou/) of the finest kind, the mystery and miracle of creativity is in its self-regenerating nature. In the excellent collection [***Conversations with Maya Angelou***](http://www.amazon.com/Conversations-Maya-Angelou-Literary/dp/087805362X/?tag=braipick-20) ([*public library*](http://www.worldcat.org/title/conversations-with-maya-angelou/oclc/18876661%26referer%3Dbrief_results)), which also gave us her [poignant exchange with Bill Moyers](http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2013/06/14/maya-angelou-bill-moyers-1973/), Angelou says:

“Creativity or talent, like electricity, is something I don’t understand but something I’m able to harness and use. While electricity remains a mystery, I know I can plug into it and light up a cathedral or a synagogue or an operating room and use it to help save a life. Or I can use it to electrocute someone. Like electricity, creativity makes no judgment. I can use it productively or destructively. The important thing is to use it. You can’t use up creativity. The more you use it, the more you have.”

**Tom Bissell**, writing in [***Magic Hours: Essays on Creators and Creation***](http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2012/04/13/magic-hours-tom-bissell/), also celebrates this magical quality of creativity:

“To create anything … is to believe, if only momentarily, you are capable of magic. … That magic … is sometimes perilous, sometimes infectious, sometimes fragile, sometimes failed, sometimes infuriating, sometimes triumphant, and sometimes tragic.”

But there might be something more precise and less mystical about the creative process. In [***Uncommon Genius: How Great Ideas Are Born***](http://www.amazon.com/Uncommon-Genius-Great-Ideas-Born/dp/0140109862/?tag=braipick-20) ([*public library*](http://www.worldcat.org/title/uncommon-genius-how-great-ideas-are-born/oclc/20167611%26referer%3Dbrief_results)), the fantastic collection of interviews with MacArthur “genius” grantees by **Denise Shekerjian**, she recapitulates her findings:

“The trick to creativity, if there is a single useful thing to say about it, is to identify your own peculiar talent and then to settle down to work with it for a good long time.”

**Steve Jobs** [famously articulated this notion](http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2011/10/20/i-steve-steve-jobs-in-his-own-words/) and took it a step further, emphasizing the importance of building a rich personal library of experiences and ideas *to* connect:

“Creativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn’t really do it, they just saw something. It seemed obvious to them after a while. That’s because they were able to connect experiences they’ve had and synthesize new things. And the reason they were able to do that was that they’ve had more experiences or they have thought more about their experiences than other people. Unfortunately, that’s too rare a commodity. A lot of people in our industry haven’t had very diverse experiences. So they don’t have enough dots to connect, and they end up with very linear solutions without a broad perspective on the problem. The broader one’s understanding of the human experience, the better design we will have.”

Musician **Amanda Palmer** puts this even more poetically in her [meditation on dot-connecting and creativity](http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2013/05/28/amanda-palmer-on-creativity-online/):

“We can only connect the dots that we collect, which makes everything you write about you. … Your connections are the thread that you weave into the cloth that becomes the story that only you can tell.”

Twenty years later, creative icon and original Mad Man **George Lois** echoed Koestler in his influential tome [***The Art of Advertising: George Lois on Mass Communication***](http://www.amazon.com/The-Art-Advertising-George-Communication/dp/0810903733/?tag=braipick-20) ([*public library*](http://www.worldcat.org/title/art-of-advertising-george-lois-on-mass-communication/oclc/2523376%26referer%3Dbrief_results)):

“Creativity can solve almost any problem. The creative act, the defeat of habit by originality, overcomes everything.”