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Chapter 03 - Creativity is a Whisper

"I'm rather kind of old school, thinking that when an artist does his work, it's no longer his ... I just see what people make of it."

- David Bowie

"A total work of art is only possible in the context of the whole of society. Everyone will be a necessary co-creator of a social architecture, and so long as anyone cannot participate, the ideal form of democracy has not been reached."

- Joseph Beuys

The Fox and the Hedgehog

In Isaiah Berlin's classic essay, he defines people according to two types: The fox who views the world through a variety of experiences or lenses and the hedgehog who possesses one defined worldview that guides all actions. Apparently, this essay was written in a bit of a tongue-in-cheek approach, and maybe that in and of itself tells us something about how to get a good idea across. Here is a serious and well-respected thinker making an argument that sounds more like it is going to be a children's story than a grand idea. And yet the impact of this essay is enduring and its lessons are ones that resonate deeply with me when I think about how to approach creativity.

Let's start at the end. In the story, the ultimate distinction is not between right and wrong but context, which is to say that there are cases where each type has value. Also let's be clear, this is a deep simplification and in reality, like so much of life, it's all about shades of gray. Maybe we are pretty foxy but inevitably there will be some hedgehog mixed in there. What is important is how these two different types approach problems and how we can use this to reach better solutions together.

A hedgehog has a clarity of mission that filters out distraction and keeps focus on the ultimate goal. There is a surety in being a hedgehog that eliminates doubt. A fox on the other hand is less likely to miss the nuances in a situation because they are focused on lots of different things. The downside is that a fox is also more likely to question any conclusion and get stuck in the process. So, how is this useful?

In the past, we built up a mythology of the visionary as someone with a broad and far reaching insight, willing to turn over any stone in the relentless pursuit of perfection. Sounds pretty much like the fox doesn't it? Once that idea was locked in, no one would be more stubborn and single minded about making it happen. Suddenly the relentlessness is turned away from exploration into one of monomaniacal adherence to the vision in its singular form. The fox has become the hedgehog but maybe not in a good way.

Robert Moses built a modern New York City and Steve Jobs connected the world with the iPhone. Unfortunately they also decimated beautiful neighborhoods and gave birth to an era of toxic social media. It turns out that it's not as simple as just being a fox or a hedgehog. What we need is a way to integrate the two approaches into a system of action that ensures that the explorations of the fox can create real value while being tempered by the efficiency of the hedgehog. Conversely we need the results-based model of the hedgehog to be liberated by some thoughtful digressions from the fox. What we need is balance and collaboration.

The Frame

There are a lot of reasons that an organization might struggle. One of the most common is actually something that should be easy to fix but proves surprisingly elusive: Goals. In most cases, the biggest issue in getting an organization to pull in the same direction is not differences in position but variations in understanding the strategic goals. A great way to start overcoming this issue is to make sure that the goals are bold but also realistic. Getting this right is the foundation of any good strategy. I call this the adjacent possible.

The adjacent possible is a concept originally conceived by the theoretical biologist Stuart Kauffman as a way to describe the next potential future state in an evolutionary process. His idea was that given the knowable present state of a species, it is theoretically possible to extrapolate all possible next stages of evolution for that species. For example, a bird might reasonably be expected to evolve a longer beak in order to optimize its ability to get bugs out of fallen logs but it would not be possible for it to grow gills and take up residence in the ocean. In practice, mapping every adjacent possible would be a gargantuan undertaking but the idea itself has a simplicity and clarity to it.

What I love about this idea, when we cast it into the world of problem solving, is that it encourages us to remove what is impossible. Then, by definition, we are left with possible outcomes for which we can design. In any process, clear attainable goals are fundamental. And yet it is startling how often we all set out on a path aimed at either a goal that is so beyond our reach that it is doomed to fail, or it appears appealing despite its total misalignment with what we should really be focusing on. The curse of the shiny object can be a powerful allure to our baser instincts. We need to improve our aim and limit our options while still allowing our assessments to evolve over time as new ideas and situations emerge.

In Deep Play, this mechanism is the frame. Framing is simple to understand and deploy. Imagine holding up your hands with thumbs extended in front of your face, one hand palm inward and the other outward. The result is a crude rectangle through which you can frame the scene in front of you. As you spread your hands, more of the scene falls in the frame and as you turn, different sections of the scene become the subject of your frame. It's that simple. If we translate this visualization into a strategic tool, we get something powerful. It's easy enough to grasp and deploy but if we learn how to scale it, aim it and when to reassess it, then we end up with better aim, the right options and flexibility to evolve.

The idea of a frame is intuitive and amazingly may well be the underlying structure of how we actually think all of the time. Jeff Hawkins introduces the idea of reference frames in his book "A Thousand Brains." In the human brain, the neocortex is the uppermost part of the brain. It is also the newest part in evolutionary terms. The old part of the brain does animal things, such as controlling movement and generating emotions that keep us from getting eaten by lions or ensures that we procreate to keep the species alive. The neocortex is different. This is the place that takes all the inputs from our senses and turns them into what we experience as reality. It does this by deploying thousands of predictive versions of the world, which Hawkins calls reference frames.

The basic idea is that our brain creates a model of the world that includes all the tiny details that our senses take in, moment to moment. Where it gets interesting is the discovery that this model is actually predictive. Imagine picking up a glass. Your brain is predicting what that experience will be like. When the experience lines up with that model we don't notice anything but now imagine that there is a tiny crack. This doesn't align with the predicted model and so it is brought to our conscious attention and the model in our brain gets updated. This is a simple example but our brain is doing this thousands and thousands of times every second of the day. Even more amazing is the fact that these predictions or reference frames are being generated not one time for one experience but multiple times for every possible experience.

Your Brain and Frames

Reality, as we experience it, is not one point of view but rather the collective knowledge created by thousands of points of view all firing off in our brains all the time. The notion of constantly evolving predictive frames that inform a model of reality isn't just a good idea, it's fundamental to being a conscious human being. One of the reasons that play is such a good model for working is that it aligns with our experience of the world. Similarly, using frames to discover, develop and formulate ideas is a powerful tool precisely because we actually already have it baked into our operating system. Deep Play seeks to work with our innate way of thinking and acting in the world, so we can use it to make some of the things outside of the brain a little easier to deal with.

When faced with a complex problem, this concept of a frame allows us to be specific and oriented at a set of outcomes but flexible as new information or conditions arise. It has one other important feature. When we start a project, there is a lot we don't know. We just use what we do know to build a frame, and as we gather information, we quickly test to see how the frame needs to change. Just because our brains can process thousands of frames in an instant, doesn't mean we can do that in our work. But if we slow this down to a manageable pace it can still provide amazing results. This deceptively simple idea allows us to move forward, toward a solution before we have that solution.