

Unlocking Your Creative Potential

“All of us are creative,” says Steven Pinker, author of *How the Mind Works*. “Every time we stick a handy object under the leg of a wobbly table or think of a new way to bribe a child into his pajamas, we have used our faculties to create a novel outcome.”

That is what creativity is all about—novel outcomes. It doesn't matter if the outcome is a stable table or a rocket engine, the source of creativity, and the work involved, is the same. One dictionary defines creativity as: having or showing imagination and artistic or intellectual inventiveness. So what does it take to be creative? Does it take unusual talent or exceptional intelligence? Not necessarily.

It's not always the most talented artist who comes up with the most creative result. It's not the smartest individual who puts forth the best ideas. Charles Darwin was only a mediocre student. Albert Einstein failed algebra. Many famous and obviously creative people never even finished high school. In fact, Pinker also says, “There is little or no relationship between IQ and achievement in any sphere of adult endeavor yet studied.”

Because creative people are not necessarily more intelligent than anyone else, it must be that they use their intelligence differently. They are not content to follow the paths that others have taken, so they collect knowledge and then apply their own ideas and uniqueness to the situation. They are in a constant state of incubation. They focus on something, put it to a test, put it aside, then come back with an even stronger focus and put it to another test.

With more than 65 patents, inventor Stanley Mason has been called the modern day Thomas Edison. He invented such practical items as the contoured disposable diaper, the granola bar, and the squeezable ketchup bottle. He lives on a sprawling farm in Connecticut in which every room is filled with books, and papers are strewn everywhere. Mason is always involved in one invention or another. I asked him a few questions to get a glimpse at how he does what he does:

BF: How do you go about inventing something?

SM: It's not very complicated. The creative process is simply trying very hard to solve a problem.

BF: Do you spend your life looking for problems?

SM: Always. Since I was a little child.

BF: So problems are really opportunities to stimulate creativity?

SM: Exactly. Who would be interested in a product that nobody wants or can use? If you want to be more creative, walk through life hunting for problems. When I go to a restaurant, I figure out, was this a good meal? Was it served efficiently? What was missing? How can it be made better? It drives my wife crazy, but it's how I view life. It's the way I come up with all my ideas for inventions. For instance, one day I was reading *Ladies Home Journal*. (I read



DIAMOND MINDS

By Barry Farber

at least one magazine a day.) In this magazine, I read a story about a man who produced flowerpots. While doing his market research, the man discovered that 19 million American families have more than 12 plants. He also discovered that there is always at least one sick plant among the 12—not because of under-watering, which was the basic assumption, but because of over watering.

I read this story and thought, what is the problem here? People are

over-watering their plants. So I decided to make a flowerpot that would prevent over-watering. I designed it and re-designed it and finally came up with one that worked, and I patented it. That's what it takes to make an invention: find a problem, come up with a solution, test it, retest it, redesign it, retest it—and then if it works, patent it.

BF: Do you have any advice for aspiring inventors?

SM: A school near my home asked me to come and talk to first and second graders about inventions. They were coming up with some crazy ideas. I told them to work on solving problems. That's what an invention is. Anybody can think of an idea, but to think of an idea that solves a problem is really terrific. Now every year they have an “invention convention” and the kids come up with some fantastic problem-solvers. So that's my advice for everyone. Be hungry for solving problems. ▲

Barry Farber is the author of 11 books, including *The 12 Cliches of Selling and Why They Work* (Workman Publishing), and was rated by *Successful Meetings* magazine as one of the top speakers for 2006. Farber is a black belt weapons expert, an entrepreneur and marketer of innovative products, and a television host and producer. To learn more, visit www.barryfarber.com or e-mail barry@barryfarber.com.