

Anthony Freeman

Creativity, Mind and Brain

*Report on the 11th Mind & Brain Symposium
King's College London, Institute of Psychiatry*

Peter Fenwick's annual 'Mind & Brain Symposium' at the Institute of Psychiatry in London, holds a special place in my affections. Largely this stems from the launch at this event, back in 1994, of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, and with it the start of my own involvement in this fascinating area of discourse. But sentiment alone does not account for the particular attraction of this event. Something in the combination of the scale — I would guess not much above a hundred delegates — and the excellent sit-down lunch and the avuncular presence of Dr Fenwick himself, presiding over the whole occasion, gives the conference the feel of a family gathering as much as an academic symposium. Yet intellectual stimulation is never lacking, and one can guarantee a unique range of speakers and intriguing presentations from within and beyond the Academy.

This year's meeting, held on Saturday 3rd March, was no exception to this rule. The theme of 'Creativity' attracted input from such diverse sources as gorillas living in darkest south-east England, students at the Royal College of Music, and an engineer/inventor with dozens of patents to her credit. (She confided that it does give a special buzz to see one's creative ideas being advertised on prime-time television in the form of the latest Bosch power tool!)

Following Peter Fenwick's brief introduction to the day, Jennifer Scott spoke to the unlikely title 'Gorilla Machiavellian Intelligence'. She made a case for gorillas being much more intelligent and creative than they are normally given credit for, speaking from her experience of studying three groups of western lowland gorillas housed at Howletts Wild Animal Park in Kent, and illustrating her talk with video footage of the animals in question. We are used to the idea that chimpanzees are inventive creatures, making simple tools (such as twigs with the bark stripped off to go 'fishing' for termites). Dr Scott suggested that low status female gorillas go one better, kidnapping the infants of their higher status rivals and using the youngsters as 'tools' for getting revenge on their mothers for past humiliations dealt out to the junior females. This delayed retaliation represents a creative (Machiavellian) manipulation of the social hierarchy and provides a

mechanism whereby lower-status individuals can exert some control over their more dominant companions. A similar kind of revenge system has been reported in chimpanzees, and this all suggests that the highly creative and complex social interactions observed in humans may have roots already established in our evolutionary past.

The least satisfactory talk, at least for this delegate, was given next by John Gruzelier of the Imperial College School of Medicine. He has been working with a group of students at the Royal College of Music, training them to control their own brain rhythms by a system of 'neurofeedback', a recent development of the attempts in the 1970s to use 'biofeedback' to control physiological symptoms and induce relaxation. In the neurofeedback training, the subject had electrodes fitted to her scalp and these fed information about her brain rhythms to a computer screen where they were displayed in symbolic form. The subject was instructed to change the shape or position of the symbol by changing the pattern of her rhythms. Professor Gruzelier claimed great success in as little as one or two twenty-minute sessions, and said that participants soon learned to 'switch on' certain patterns at will — for example during a concert performance — and that this control brought about a measurably enhanced quality of playing and musicianship. Unfortunately it was never made clear what the subjects actually did, or were told to do, to bring about the desired change on the screen (and so in their brains). Nor was any mechanism proposed. Only the alleged benefits were trumpeted. The rhetoric was more akin to purveying quack remedies than reporting scientific research.

The session after morning coffee was taken by Clare Huffington and William Halton from what is now called 'The Tavistock Consultancy Service' (enjoying a unique place in the National Health Service promoting 'organisational health'). The product may have been repackaged and differently funded, but the transcript read out by William Halton — of a session exploring anxieties that impede creativity in a group setting — could have come straight out of the old Tavvy's 'group dynamic' training of thirty years ago. I would not belittle the value to me and many others of the insights provided by such exercises, but it did cross my mind that creativity, in the form of research and development, had perhaps not been at the top of the Tavistock's own agenda for quite some time.

A number of the speakers addressed the nature of the creative process, and what seem to be its essential components. The morning's last contributor offered a mnemonic, RIDER:

- Review
- Incubation
- Dreaming/Drifting
- Excitement
- Reality-checks

These stand for five key creative elements, though he stressed that the order is flexible and they must not be thought of as rigid stages. John Howkins was drawing on his experience as project manager in the film and television industries, and especially the creative power-house that is Hollywood. With that background he was keen to insist that creativity is not inherently good, and that an ethical evaluation of creativity is always needed.

We returned to the lecture theatre a little after the scheduled afternoon start time of 2.15 p.m. The selection of sweet & sour chicken, mushroom stroganoff, and dressed salmon fillet — not to mention the cheesecake, the fudge cake, the eclairs, etc. — that had graced the lunch table made retaining consciousness the ‘hard problem’ during the ensuing hour. If there was truth in one speaker’s claim — backed up by quotations from creative geniuses both scientific and artistic — that the ‘hypnagogic state’ was an excellent cradle of creativity, then the post-prandial session should have been the most productive of the day.

The lucky speaker scheduled to reap the benefit was Anne Miller, the inventive engineer who so enjoyed watching the advertisements for her ‘clunk-click’ easy-fix power tool attachments. She explored what she called ‘the ambiguous half-light’ that is essential for the brain’s intuitive processes to open to new ideas, before getting seduced into the ‘bright light of certainty’. Her other concern — touched on by a number of presenters — was the question of individual versus team creativity. She saw great potential dangers in ‘groupthink’ stifling originality, but conceded that there is also a need for the lateral leaps which can often be produced when ideas are pooled.

The sole *JCS* contributor on the platform was Professor Guy Claxton of Bristol University. He gave the most straight-forwardly academic lecture of the day, emphasizing the need to let fresh ideas emerge into consciousness, rather than trying to figure everything out proactively. He gave a neurological underpinning to the pragmatic advice of earlier speakers that an interspersing of hard thinking and reverie often produces the most innovative results. His customary arresting delivery and direct engagement with his audience ensured that, on this occasion at least, thinking beat reverie hands down (the fudge cake notwithstanding).

The symposium was rounded off by Jane Henry, Chair of the Open University MBA Programme on Creativity, Innovation and Change. She has a long-standing association with the psi research community and was expected to speak about the links (if any) between creativity, intuition, and ESP. In the event she steered fairly clear of the psychic and extra-sensory dimension, and it seemed to me that she did little more than reinforce what the earlier presentations had offered about the general nature of creativity.

She did however earn her place on the platform. There had been a kind of running-tease throughout the day, as Peter Fenwick tried to elicit from each speaker a word of support for his own intuition that creativity depends in some degree upon a Jungian-style shared subconscious. With Dr Henry his patience and persistence were finally rewarded. A pleasing end to a pleasing day.