Cultural Daily

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The Question that Opens an Ocean of Creativity

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, October 3rd, 2018

This article is adapted from a talk recently given at the Pebble Beach Authors and Ideas Festival.

On an early fall afternoon, five years ago, a rough-hewn wood crate the size of a grand piano arrived in West Los Angeles. The crate had been assembled by workers in Bristol, England, to fulfill a custom order: To transport the collective aspirations of a hundred people to make a change on our planet.

That aspiration for change had had its origin five years even before, in the center of the Pacific Ocean, mid-day, clear skies, flat waters. There, a woman named Jo Ruxton, who had been a producer for the BBC's natural history unit, had gone in search of what was reported to be the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. She held the mental image we all do: An island flotilla of plastic, "twice the size of Texas;" if it was big enough and stable enough, maybe they could tie their ship off, walk onto it, and take some photographs.

Instead, they saw nothing but flat waters, open waters, unbroken surface, dark blue. Jo turned to the scientist-crew. They had brought with them an instrument called a manta trawl, which looks like a long sock, made of fine mesh. Think of it as a giant tea strainer. They submerged the strainer and dragged it behind the ship, then pulled it to the surface. There, within the mesh, were hundreds of fine plastic particles, some worn by salt and sun to the size of grains of sand. It turns out the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is not a floating island. Instead, the truth is insidious: It is a gigantic cloud of micro-particle plastic smog, below the surface. At that moment, Jo told me later, she knew what she had to do: she would make a documentary film about the state of our oceans and how plastic flows into them.

That journey would take the better part of a decade. She had never made a feature-length documentary before. She raised money and found a director, a Tasmanian journalist named Craig Leeson who was passionate about the oceans. She started a foundation to get non-profit financing. They shot some film and ran out of money. They shot some more film and ran out of money. This process repeated itself – it is the common process all documentary filmmakers face – until they had travelled pretty much around the world, shooting sequences and investigating problems and solutions. Then money ran out entirely. Everything they shot was sitting on hard drives in a storage facility in Bristol, England.

This is where I come into the story. Having had a career in theatre, then moving to become a senior executive at Walt Disney Studios, I had, most recently, been the President of National Geographic Films, a post I held for seven years. There I learned to make documentaries, and we had

remarkable success with films like *March of the Penguins.* When you have been the President of National Geographic Films, even after you leave, you come into the information circuit of the most crazy, passionate people in the world, who are people who document our planet and its creatures.

When you're in that information circuit, you get a call like the one I did, from Craig, the Tasmanian director. "Can you help us?" he asked. "We have shot so much, but we don't have a film."

To be clear, I am not an activist. I care deeply about our planet, about crucial social and political issues, but community organizing, politicking, building coalitions, pushing legislation – that's not my super-power. The most significant super-power now – and one that I believe all of us have, all of us have, that's why I am sharing this story – is to do something you love to do, something you find profoundly comfortable to do, and facilitate it for others you care about. Through that I express my activism. As we all can.

When you get a call like that, like the one Craig made, asking "Can you help us?" you dive deep, learn a lot, see what's there, and eventually say *Yes*. Which is what led to that rough-hewn wood crate the size of grand piano. Four delivery men had carried it, and thudded it down on the floor.

There it is before you. You cannot contain your curiosity. You get your team together, find screwdrivers and claw hammers, and pry off the lid. Careful not to get splinters, two of you lift off the top. There, under straw, you find the treasure of months of filming around the world: One hundred hard drives. All in different formats. Without cables.

In fact, the crate contained two problems, and the lack of cables was the small one. The big one was that in the time since Jo had first thought about making this film, the media business had undergone a cosmic shift: it had moved from a business model where the most important players are not the people who make and control content. Now, the most important players are those who own and control audiences.

It is no longer about making a movie, or writing a book. It's not about being a studio or a publisher, or an indie or a self-publisher. It's not about being a content maker. The model has moved to audience owners. Amazon. Netflix. Google. Apple.

Let's take a single movie as an example. If you're going to make it – and let's say you do get it made – you then have to market it, you have to find your audience, and convince them to buy a ticket or stream it. If you're a movie studio you have to do that same process 15 or 20 times a year. It is costly and inefficient.

But if you're Netflix, and you own your audience – Netflix owns us so much that we pay then $10 a month to own us – a new movie just pops up on your feed.

Creative life today embodies this paradox, the paradox within this cosmic shift. It has never been easier to make and distribute your work. But it has never been harder to get anyone to pay attention to it. There are something like 500 hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute. A billion hours watched there every day.

It's not that creative people need help with marketing. Well, yes, some do, but my point is that creative people need collaborators with everything. So many tasks previously done by the studio, the publisher, the broadcaster, are now downshifted to the creative people. These are tasks creative

artists may not be perfectly suited to do. Yet we want their voices to be heard, their documentaries made, their songs sung, because creative work forms the fabric of our culture.

Better creativity, widely shared, makes our society better. Creativity doesn't need an army, but it does need some profoundly committed collaborators. Creativity is a kind of asymmetric warfare. And no one does it alone.

Creativity is the catalyst for innovation. Everything that emerges, emerges from a creative idea. This page, this font, these words – they begin as human thought, thought that then emerges to become physical, powerful, powerful in the way that sound waves or light waves move through time and space to engage your physical being and change you.

Yes, change. Each movement of matter, each particle or wave, each emission of energy, changes those who receive it. At times the change is chemical, as when we react to smell. At times it is electrical, as when our neurons jump their electrons to form images we see or give sense to words. At times it is purely at the level of energy: spiritual force, feelings, emotions.

Creativity is also political. A matter that is especially momentous right now. Poets, if you know any, will not strike you as especially dangerous or threatening people. But authoritarian regimes put poets in jail. The creative act can be politically portentous.

If creativity is the catalyst for innovation, for change, what is the catalyst for creativity? What's grandest is this: It is other people. Precisely: it is you, when you ask, "What do I love to do, something I am profoundly comfortable doing? How can facilitate it for the creative people I care about?"

What happened to those 100 hard drives? We finished the movie. We found a way to own an audience by reaching out to 250 like-minded NGOs and non-profits and working with them, so their membership knew about the film. We released the trailer, and with these partnerships we got 1 million views in 12 days; at which point, we secured distribution.

When *A Plastic Ocean* opened in 2016, it instantly became the Number 1 documentary in the US, Canada, and the UK. And it has not followed the normal decay curve for movies – it is still going strong. It is now available in 36 countries in 22 languages; the United Nations invited us to screen it; our State Dept. has made it available in American embassies worldwide; and it has influenced more than 100 legislatures to change laws, including California's recent plastic bag ban. That is a remarkable result.

As I said before, I am not an activist; I did not, could not, do the cooperative organizing work it takes to get laws passed – I did what I could do, which is how I express my activism: I produced a film, something I love to do, something I am profoundly comfortable doing, and I facilitated that for creative people I care about.

When should we best focus on creative people? When they are adults, at college-age and beyond.

Not to diminish creativity and arts education in primary and secondary school. They are essential. They elevate everything. When, in the 1980s, California saw its high school math and science scores drop in comparison to the rest of the world, Sacramento cut school arts programs to divert more money to STEM – and math and science scores dropped even further. Most politicians move from ideology instead of data, from fear instead of from love, they see the arts as superfluous

instead as the core of our society. Hashtag: Sad.

Why college and beyond? Because that's where the creative impulse really gets beat out of people, in the common chorus of "be practical, go get a real job." I say yes, let's definitely be practical. Let's be practical with our creative people. Which is why among the very big ideas we grapple with, we also need to bring things down to this seeming small item, the self, myself, yourself, asking this seemingly small question: *What do you love to do, that you feel profoundly comfortable doing, and how can you facilitate that for the creative people you care about?*

In 1968, an artist declared, "In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes." Well, we're 50 years on, the future is now, and if all of us would ask this question – "What do I love to do, that I feel profoundly comfortable doing, and how can I facilitate that for the creative people I care about?" – we would give artists the world.

I predict that in the next 15 hours, or 15 months, you will come across it. It will be in front of you, landing with a definitive sound. A rough wood crate, the size of a grand piano. What if, inside it, is the ocean?

Image: A scene from A Plastic Ocean.

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