

Considering the advantages of occasionally not thinking

While writing my counselling dissertation I experienced a long period of stuckness – even though I knew what had to be done I was not able to do any of it. Unexpectedly – in the middle of writing the dissertation – I found myself exploring the way out of creative blocks. In what follows I would like to share a reading thread that helped me overcome the stuckness and strengthened my belief in the benefits of developing a meditation practice.

The first clue in my quest showed up while reading *The Power Of Now*. In it Tolle states:

“The mind is essentially a survival machine. Attack and defence against other minds, gathering, storing and analysing information – this is what it is good for, but not at all creative. All true artists whether they know it or not, create from a place of no-mind, from inner stillness. The mind then gives form to the creative impulse or insight. Even the great scientists have reported that their creative breakthroughs came at a time of mental quietude. ... So I would say that the simple reason why the majority of scientist are *not* creative is not because they don't know how to think but because they don't know how to stop thinking.”

(Tolle, 2005, p.20; italics in the original)

This view of creativity was also discussed by Maslow:

“The puzzle that I'm now trying to unravel is suggested by the observation that the creative person, in the inspirational phase of the creative furor, loses his past and his future and lives only in the moment. ... This ability to become 'lost in the present' seems to be a *sine qua non* for creativeness of any kind. But also certain *prerequisites* for creativeness – in whatever realm – somehow have something to do with this ability to become timeless, selfless, outside of space, of society, of history.”

(Maslow, 1973, p.63)

In his writing Tolle refers to *The Ghost In The Machine*. I decided to check this book out and found the following very instructive.

“Language can become a screen between the thinking and reality; and creativity often starts where language ends, that is, by regressing to pre-verbal levels of mental activity”

(Koestler, 1989, p.180).

These views of creativity reminded me that when I was an art student the work – the creative act – seemed to emerge as if from nowhere. I was also reminded of an incident that occurred while I was working in an office. A team member was driving me crazy and I was not able to rationalise my way out of the personality crush. As a last resource I started to meditate with a mantra every morning. I let the lines: “I am who I am ... she is who she is ... I am who I am ... she is who she is...” flow through my awareness. During these meditations all sorts of insights popped-up and slowly created a new way to approach this difficult relationship. I realised that if I could recapture this way of working I would be able to bypass the writing block.

I decided to proactively create a situation of non-thinking. In my office, which is also the place I practice yoga, there is a painting by David Button (see below). I made the woods, with the clearing in sight, the symbol of my enquiry. I am still in the woods but the opening is within reach. I let myself know that it is possible I might experience some understanding as I practice being present in the present moment in sight of the clearing. After a while I had to leave scrap paper within reach because thoughts started to emerge on a daily basis. A significant aspect of writing emerged from non-verbal states.



David Button, Untitled.

My solution might sound magical but it helped me to stop trying so hard. Once I stopped trying the ‘right’ thoughts trickle, and then flowed at a sturdy pace. Since that experience I have had the opportunity to observe the strength of this approach, in small day to day activities. For example, noticing how yoga practices that ‘emerged’ from ‘nowhere’ are often more nourishing than pre-planned sessions.

On a practical level the only way I know of learning to let go of thoughts is meditation. I found moving meditation (yoga postures, walking meditation) more helpful for the practice described above. I think it is because my moving meditation practice is stronger than my sitting practice.

There are lots of meditation traditions because different approaches work for different people. If you are interested in exploring meditation find a meditation practice that works for you and practice it (and practice... and practice...). If you don't have access to a meditation teacher you can try *How To Meditate* by Lawrence Leshane.