

Creativity—C²

January 28, 2007

Bible Passage: **Galatians 6:4** Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don't be impressed with yourself. Don't compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.

Do you remember back to your days in high school when you had to work on group projects? The groans I hear from you all right now are the same groans I remember hearing when I used to be a history teacher assigning those projects. It never failed that when I would introduce a group project at least half the class would fidget and groan and eyes would roll back into their wee teenage heads.

The biggest complaint most students had about group projects is that all the students got the same grade and usually one student did all the work. And to be honest in many instances I know that to be true. It didn't take a genius to figure out that the kids who were really worried about their grades weren't about to let some bonehead ruin their transcript. So one kid *did* end up doing all the work. In my early years as a classroom teacher I began to try to make procedural changes to try to correct this little problem. As part of the evaluation process I had all the kids fill out a self-evaluation and then evaluate everyone on their team. I even went so far as to make the student self-evaluation as part of the grade so they would really take it seriously.

This worked for the most part...but what I discovered was that I hadn't really addressed the real issue. I had made a technical fix when a radical, adaptive change was necessary. It was the case of the proverbial putting on a band-aid when major surgery was really what was required.

At issue here was really...what is the purpose of a group project. And, often, kids wanted to know and would ask...“Mr. Abell, what's the purpose of us doing these stupid group projects? Nobody wants to do them.” I always answered that question by saying, “What do you mean nobody wants to do them? The kids that don't do any work and get an A want to do them!” But then I would answer seriously, “The reason we do group projects is because when you get to college and into the work world, collaborative, group work is what is required to be successful. At the time, part of the state standards for social studies at the secondary level was to incorporate collaborative work.

Even with these seemingly well-thought, academically backed answers...I and the whole system was missing the boat. It wasn't until I went to an AP conference that the light switched on for me. (By the way...AP stands for Advanced Placement which is coursework designed specifically for students going on to college.) Anyway, the presenter at the conference must have been a fly on the wall in my classroom because he got

right to the heart of the matter asking all of us how many people assigned group projects? 99% of the hands in the room when up. Okay, *why* do you assign group projects? Welllllllll, I thought I had all the answers; I'd show everybody how smart I was...I'd done the research—“We do group projects to prepare our students to function in the workplace of the 21st century.”

Silence.....uncomfortable
silence.....furrowed brow

Do, do you *really* believe that? And, yes, he was just that matter-of-fact. Uh, yes. WRONG! You only assign group projects like that if you want to stifle creativity and stifle real learning. He went on to say...“let me explain what I mean. What happens in these group projects is that the kids who end up doing all the work are cut from the same learning-style cloth. They are very process oriented. In terms of learning styles these kids are usually from Logical / Mathematical family. This is often called ‘scientific thinking.’”

He went on to say that what usually happens in group projects is that these kids—who are often perceived as the “smart kids”—dominate the group whether other students would be willing to participate or not. These kids are so results oriented and often see the quickest, most efficient way to get the project done. The problem is that we have robbed the other kids of a significant contribution and we have really done a disservice to the left brain whiz kids by not stretching their *creative* thinking

He concluded by saying, “So no, the purpose of group projects is not to produce good little corporate collaborators, the purpose is to create a project that is much richer and robust because it calls for the “creative kids” to make a equal and significant contribution—it brings the right brain and the left brain together to produce something much more incredible than was possible in the old model.

The problem is that often time creativity is not seen as real learning. My good friend Richard often teases me about getting my information from Starbuck's coffee cups...“Is there anything you say that didn't come from a Starbuck's coffee cup?” Well phooey on yooey—but here goes...From a Starbuck's cup The Way I See It #184:

My father said being an artist was the shortest road to the poorhouse, claiming “real” work is something you don't like. I ignored him through oppositional behavior, later reasoning that only an idiot sets out to find the poorhouse, not to mention devote himself to something he doesn't love. Instead, I discovered an interesting back road to the unknown, and deliberately without a safety net. ~Russell Chatham

Painter, lithographer, author, publisher and restaurateur.

You know, I read that and could really relate. My dad was one of the scientific thinker types...he was a medical doctor. He often pushed me toward things he thought were valuable for me. For instance, like selling Yellow Book advertising one

summer in Memphis instead of traveling Europe with my college roommate. He reasoned that selling Yellow Book advertising would be of far greater value for me than frittering away a summer in Europe.

Well, as it turns out, I was a chip off the old block in the classroom. What dad and I failed to see—just like Russell Chatham's dad—was that the creative piece was as important, if not more important than any other thing...but creativity is often discounted as not "real learning."

If we are really honest about this, I think it goes much deeper than just learning styles or better group projects. I think it goes to the core of our being...of our very creation. If we take the idea of being created by God seriously then we have to consider what The Bible says about creation. In Genesis 1:27 it says this about creation...

God created human beings; God created them godlike, reflecting God's nature. God created them male and female.

Well, what do we imagine it means to be Godlike? The understanding I have come to about God is that I don't understand. What I believe is that God is in and of everything. God is not monochromatic. God is not the most efficient way to get finished. God is often the long way around...God is the big 64 color Crayola box (the one with the sharpener on the back!) God is the trip to Europe.

What happens when we limit creativity is that we are denying our very *creation*. Have you ever noticed how closely those words are connected? We are at our absolute best, and honoring each others ability when we encourage creativity.

Just before Christmas I was at a party with some friends. We were having a very lovely evening getting to know some new people. Then the hostess gave everyone a nametag and put it on our backs where we couldn't see it. The way you found out who you were is by asking other people questions about yourself. What I didn't know was this was an elaborate scheme to not only get teamed up with people, but it was also a little exercise to lubricate our creative thinking.

Eventually we were placed into teams of 4-5 people. Each team was given a green plastic trash bag with identical contents. The instructions were this...Each team was to select one member of their team that would become a Christmas tree. Now hear me correctly, using the contents of the bag, *a person* would be decorated as a Christmas tree. Each team was sent off into seclusion not to emerge until the *tree* was decorated.

Oh boy...Well, my team consisted of me, a woman I had never met before and two guys who played offensive line in college. No offense to all of our friends in the room who played offensive line, but come on! Well, we headed off into our little elf's hut to create. Somehow, not surprisingly, the poor woman *volunteered* to be the Christmas tree. We all kind of stammered around trying to think of what to do. We finally settle on the Poncho Villa Christmas. We cut a hole in the

trash bag and put it on. Our next step was to try and make gun belts to crisscross...you know...the bullety things. Then, we'd string the bullety things with lights—YES...lights!

That's where we got stuck...it just wasn't working. The problem was we weren't thinking as a group. It was one person thinking and everyone else doing tasks. We all agreed this kind of stunk. Then we began all throwing ideas out until we got one that stuck. I kid you not, when we settled on our idea, I fell on the floor laughing hysterically. When the right idea emerged, we all went to work. Now, I'm not at liberty to tell you the name of our Christmas tree—suffice to say, it was completely creative. When it was our turn to present our tree, everyone was in stitches. And the reason we ended up with such a fun, creative tree was because together we truly got more out of each other than any one individual possibly could have on our own.

The other two teams were equally as creative...AND completely different. I found that so incredible that three teams were given the same material and same task and emerged with completely different, but equally creative products. I believe this event speaks directly to our Bible passage today which says:

Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don't be impressed with yourself. Don't compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.

My belief is that all of life is a group project. We were created by God to be unique. Some blessed with organizational skills, some blessed with artistic ability. When we are working together with others whether it is a group project in school, at work, or working together in our personal relationships, when each of us takes responsibility for doing our creative best, and we honor and affirm the creative best of others we are being partners with God in expanding creation in others and ourselves. It is as actor Alan Alda said:

CLOSING:

"Be brave enough to live creatively. The creative is the place where no one else has ever been. You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. You can't get there by bus, only by hard work, risking, and by not quite knowing what you're doing. What you'll discover will be wonderful: yourself."

Have a great Sunday, go in Peace.