

D.W. Winnicott

Home is Where
We Start From

Essays by a Psychoanalyst

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whether to include, those who reach to health in spite of handicaps.

6. Name the three areas in which human beings live, and suggest that it is a matter of health that some lives are valuable and effective, that some personalities are rich and creative, and that for some experience in the cultural area is the most important bonus that health brings.

7. Lastly, indicate not only that society depends for its health on the health of its members, but also that its patterns are those of its members reduplicated. In this way democracy (in one meaning of the word) is an indication of health because it arises naturally out of the family, which is in itself a construct for which healthy individuals are responsible.

Living Creatively

*An amalgamation of two drafts of a talk
prepared for the Progressive League, 1970*

Definition of Creativity

Whatever definition we arrive at, it must include the idea that life is worth living or not, according to whether creativity is or is not a part of an individual person's living experience.

To be creative a person must exist and have a feeling of existing, not in conscious awareness, but as a basic place to operate from.

Creativity is then the doing that arises out of being. It indicates that he who is, is alive. Impulse may be at rest, but when the word 'doing' becomes appropriate, then already there is creativity.

It is possible to show that in some people at certain times the activities that indicate that the person is alive are simply reactions to stimulus. A whole life may be built on the pattern of reacting to stimuli. Withdraw the stimuli and the individual has no life. But in the extreme of such a case, the word 'being' has no relevance. In order to be and to have the feeling that one *is*, one must have a predominance of impulse-doing over reactive-doing.

These things are not just a matter of the will and of the arrangement and rearrangement of life. The basic patterns are laid down in the process of emotional growth, and near the beginning are the factors that have the greatest influence. Most people must be presumed to be somewhere in the middle between the two extremes, and it is in this midway

area that there is opportunity for us to affect our own patterns; and it is this opportunity which we feel we have that makes this sort of discussion interesting, not merely an academic exercise. (Also, we are considering what we can do as parents and educators.)

Creativity, then, is the retention throughout life of something that belongs properly to infant experience: the ability to create the world. For the baby this is not difficult, because if the mother is able to adapt to the baby's needs, the baby has no initial appreciation of the fact that the world was there before he or she was conceived or conceived of. The Reality Principle is the fact of the existence of the world whether the baby creates it or not.

The Reality Principle is just too bad, but by the time the little child is called upon to say 'ta', big developments have taken place and the child has acquired genetically determined mental mechanisms for coping with this insult. For the Reality Principle is an insult.

I am ready to describe some of these mental mechanisms. Given good-enough environmental conditions, the individual child (who became you and me) found ways of absorbing the insult. Compliance, at one extreme, simplifies the relationship with other people who, of course, have their own needs to attend to, their own omnipotence to cater for. At the other extreme the child retains omnipotence in the guise of being creative and having a personal view of everything.

To give a crude illustration: if a mother has eight children, there are eight mothers. This is not simply because of the fact that the mother was different in her attitude to each of the eight. If she could have been exactly the same with each (and I know this is absurd, for she is not a machine), each child would have had his and her own mother seen through individual eyes.

By an extremely complex process of growth genetically determined, and the interaction of the individual's growth with external factors that tend to be positively facilitating or unadaptive and reaction-producing, the child that became

you or me found itself equipped with some capacity to see everything in a fresh way, to be creative in every detail of living.

I could look up creativity in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, and I could do research on all that has been written on the subject in philosophy and psychology, and then I could serve it all up on a dish. Even this could be garnished in such a way that you would exclaim: 'How original!' Personally, I am unable to follow this plan. I have this need to talk as though no one had ever examined the subject before, and of course this can make my words ridiculous. But I think you can see in this my own need to make sure I am not buried by my theme. It would kill me to work out the concordance of creativity references. Evidently I must be always fighting to *feel* creative, and this has the disadvantage that if I am describing a simple word like 'love', I must start from scratch. (Perhaps that's the right place to start from.) But I will return to this theme when I get to the distinction between creative living and creative art.

I have now looked up the word 'create' in a dictionary, and I find: 'bring into existence'. A creation can be 'a production of the human mind'. It is not certain that creativity is a word at all acceptable to the erudite. By creative living I mean not getting killed or annihilated all the time by compliance or by reacting to the world that impinges; I mean seeing everything afresh all the time. I refer to apperception as opposed to perception.

Origins of Creativity

Perhaps I have shown what I believe to be the origin of creativity. There has to be a double statement. Creativity belongs to being alive – so that unless at rest, the person is reaching out in some way so that if an object is in the way there can be a relationship. But this is only one half. The other half belongs to the idea that reaching out physically or mentally has no meaning except for a being who is there to

be. A baby born with nearly no brain may reach out and find and use an object, but there has been no experience of creative living. Also, the normal baby needs to grow in complexity and to become an established exister in order to be experiencing reaching out and finding an object as a creative act.

So I come back to the maxim: Be before Do. Be has to develop behind Do. Then eventually the child rides even the instincts without loss of sense of self. The origin, therefore, is the individual's genetically determined tendency to be alive and to stay alive and to relate to objects that get in the way when the moments come for reaching out, even for the moon.

Maintaining Creativity

For the individual who is not too distorted by faulty introduction to the world, there is considerable scope for fostering this most desirable attribute. It is true, as you will certainly point out to me, that a great deal of living can be a chore. Someone has to do the chores. It is difficult to discuss clearly, because there are some who even find chores useful; perhaps the fact that not much intelligence is needed for scrubbing a floor leaves welcome opportunity for a split-off area of imaginative experience. But there is also the matter of cross-identifications, which I will deal with later. A woman may be scrubbing a floor and not be bored because she is enjoying making a muddy mess vicariously, through identification with her horrid child who, in moments of creative living, brings in the garden mud and tramples it in. He works on the assumption that mothers love cleaning up floors, and this is his potency, appropriate to his horrid age. (People refer to this as phase-adequate. That makes it sound quite good I always think!)

Or a man may be as near bored as possible working on a conveyor-belt, but when he thinks of the money, he is also thinking of that improvement he hopes to make to the kitchen

sink or he is already watching Southampton surprisingly beat Manchester City on his TV, only half paid for.

The fact is that people must not take jobs that they find stifling – or if they cannot avoid this, they must organize their weekends so as to feed the imagination, even at the worst moments of boring routine. It has been said that it is easier to keep the imaginative life going in a truly boring routine than in an area of somewhat interesting work. It must be remembered, too, that the work may be very interesting to someone else who is using it for creative living, but who does not allow anyone else to use personal discretion.

Somewhere in the scheme of things there can be room for everyone to live creatively. This involves retaining something personal, perhaps secret, that is unmistakably yourself. If nothing else, try breathing, something no one can do *for* you. Or perhaps you are yourself when writing to your friend, or sending letters to *The Times* and *New Society*, presumably to be read by someone before being thrown away.

Creative Living and Artistic Creation

In mentioning letter writing, I am getting near to another subject which I must not leave aside. I must make clear the distinction between creative living and being artistically creative.

In creative living you or I find that everything we do strengthens the feeling that we are alive, that we are ourselves. One can look at a tree (not necessarily at a picture) and look creatively. If you have ever had a depression phase of the schizoid sort (and most have), you will know this in the negative. How often I have been told: 'There is a laburnum outside my window and the sun is out and I know intellectually that it must be a grand sight, for those who can see it. But for me this morning (Monday) there is no meaning in it. I cannot feel it. It makes me acutely aware of not being myself real.'

Although allied to creative living, the active creations of

letter writers, writers, poets, artists, sculptors, architects, musicians, are different. You will agree that if someone is engaged in artistic creation, we hope he or she can call on some special talent. But for creative living we need no special talent. This is a universal need, and a universal experience, and even the bedridden, withdrawn schizophrenic may be living creatively in a secret mental activity, and therefore in a sense happy. Unhappy is a you or a me who, over a phase, is conscious of the lack of what is essential to the human being, much more important than eating or than physical survival. If we had time, there is something to be said here about the anxiety that is a drive behind the artist's brand of creativity.

Creative Living in Marriage

There seems to be a need for a discussion based on the fact that in one or both partners in a marriage there is quite frequently a feeling of initiative ebbing. Something appears here which is a common experience, although there must be much variation in the degree to which this feeling is important relative to all the other things about life which could be said. Here and now I must take it for granted that *not all married couples feel that they can be creative as well as married*. One or the other of the two finds himself or herself involved in a process which could end in one living in a world which is really created by the other. In the extreme this must be very uncomfortable, but I suppose that in the majority of cases it does not reach an extreme state, although it is always latent and may from time to time appear in an acute form. The whole problem may, for instance, be hidden under a couple of decades of child-rearing and emerge as a mid-life crisis.

There is probably a rather simple way of talking about this problem if one starts at the surface. I know two people who have been married a long time and brought up quite a large family. In the first summer holiday of their marriage, after they had spent a week together, the man said: 'Now I'm going off to have a week's sailing.' His wife said: 'Well, I like

travelling so I am packing my bag.' Their friends put up their hands and said: 'I can't see much future for that marriage!' However, the prognostications were too gloomy and these people have made a very successful marriage, and one of the most important things about it is that the man gets his sailing week in which he increases his skill and enjoys his speciality, whereas his wife has taken her suitcase all over Europe. They have a lot to tell each other in the remaining fifty-odd weeks and find it a help in their relationship that they walk away from each other for half of every summer holiday.

There are many who would not like this. There is no rule about human beings which applies universally. Nevertheless, this instance could illustrate how two people are not afraid to leave each other, they have much to gain, and if they are afraid to leave each other, they are liable to get bored with each other. This boredom could be a result of clamping down on creative living, which essentially arises from the individual, not from the partnership, although a partner may inspire creativity.

If we look at practically any family that is a going concern, we will find the equivalent of this arrangement that I have described in the case of these two people. I need not fill out the details; how the wife plays the violin and the man spends an evening a week in a pub sipping shandy with a few friends. With human beings there is an infinite variety in normality or health. If we decide to talk about *difficulties*, it is certain that we shall find ourselves describing patterns which people find themselves involved in, and which they find themselves boringly repeating, and which indicate that there is something wrong somewhere. There is a compulsive element in it all, and this compulsive element has fear somewhere a long way at the back of it. There are many who are unable to be creative because they are caught up in compulsions which belong to something to do with their own past history. I think that it is only to those who are relatively happy in this respect, that is, who are not driven by compulsions, that I

can talk with ease about being hampered in marriage. To people who are bothered because a relationship seems to be stifling them, one can say but little. There is no useful advice one can give and one cannot be doing everybody's therapy.

Between the two extremes – those who feel they retain creative living in marriage and those who are hampered in this respect by marriage – there is surely some kind of borderline; and on this borderline very many of us happen to be situated. We are *happy enough*, and can be creative, but we do realize that there is inherently some kind of a clash between the personal impulse and the compromises that belong to any kind of relationship that has reliable features. In other words, we are once more talking about the Reality Principle, and eventually, as we pursue our argument, shall find ourselves going over again some aspect of the individual's attempt to accept external reality without too much loss of personal impulse. This is one of several basic troubles that belong to human nature, and it is at the early stages of one's own personal emotional development that the basis of one's own capacity in this respect is being laid down.

One could say that we often talk about the successful marriage in terms of how many children there are, or in terms of the friendship which the two partners are able to build up. We can easily be glib about these matters, and I know you do not want me to keep to that which is facile and superficial. If we talk about sex, which, after all, must be given a central place in a discussion on marriage, we shall find a most amazing quantity of distress everywhere. It would be quite a good axiom, I suggest, that it is not common to find married people who feel that in their sexual life they each live creatively. A great deal has been written about all this, and perhaps it is the psychoanalyst's misfortune that he knows more about these difficulties and the distress that goes with them than most people do. It is not possible for the psychoanalyst to maintain the illusion that people get married and live happily ever afterwards, at any rate in their sexual life. When two people are in love and they are young there

can be a time, and it can be a prolonged one, in which their sexual relationship is a creative experience for each. This indeed is health and we are glad when young people unself-consciously experience this at first hand. I think it is very wrong if we advertise to young people the idea that it is common for such a state of affairs to last for a long period after marriage. Someone said (only, I am afraid, facetiously): 'There are two kinds of marriage; in one the girl knows she has married the wrong man on the way up to the altar, and in the other she knows it on the way back.' But there is no reason to be funny about it really. The trouble is when we set out to give young people the idea that marriage is a prolonged love affair. But I would hate to do the opposite and to sell disillusionment to young people, to make it a business to see that young people know everything and have no illusions. If one *has been happy*, one can bear distress. It is the same when we say that a baby cannot be weaned unless he or she has had the breast, or breast equivalent. There is no disillusionment (acceptance of the Reality Principle) except on a basis of illusion. It does give people a terrible sense of failure when they find that such an important thing as sexual experience is becoming more and more a creative experience for only one of the couple. It can work well sometimes when sex starts off badly, and gradually the two people achieve some kind of compromise, or give and take, so that there is eventually some creative experience on both sides.

One has to say that mutual sexuality is healthy and a great help, but it would be wrong to assume that the only solution to life's problems is in mutual sex. We need to pay attention to what is latent, when sex, as well as being an enriching phenomenon, is also an ever-recurring therapy.

Here I want to remind you of the special mental mechanisms of projection and introjection: I mean the functions of identifying oneself with others and others with oneself. As you would expect, there are those who cannot use these mechanisms, and there are those who can if they will, and there are those who do so compulsively whether they want to

or not. In plain English, I refer to being able to stand in other people's shoes, and to matters of sympathy and empathy.

Obviously, when two people live together with a close and publicly announced tie as in marriage, they have full scope for each living through the other. In health this can be exploited or not, according to circumstances. But some couples find themselves awkwardly handing over roles to each other, whereas in other cases there is fluidity and flexibility of all degrees. Clearly it is convenient if a woman can hand over to the man the male part of the physical sex act, and the same the other way round. However, there is not only acting; there is also the imagination, and *imaginatively* there is surely no part of life that cannot be handed over or taken over.

With this in our minds, we can look at the special case of creativity. There is not much in it when it comes to an examination of the sex function: who is more creative, a father or a mother? I would not like to say. We can leave this question aside. But right in this area of *actual* functioning, it has to be remembered that a baby may be *conceived* uncreatively – that is, without being *conceived of*, without having been arrived at as an idea in the mind. On the other hand, a baby may start up just at the right moment when it is wanted by both parties. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Edward Albee studies the fate of a baby that is conceived of, but without taking flesh. What a remarkable study both in play and film!

But I want to drag myself away from this matter of actual sex and actual babies, because everything that we do can be done creatively or uncreatively. I want to take up again the theme of the origins of the individual's capacity to live creatively.

More about the Origins of Creative Living

It is the old, old story. What we are like depends very much on where we have arrived in our emotional development, or

how far we were given opportunity for that part of growth that has to do with the early stages of object-relating, and I want to talk about this.

I know I shall be saying: happy is he or she who is being creative all the time in personal life as well as through life partners, children, friends, etc. There is nothing that is outside this philosophical territory.

I can look at a clock and only see the time; maybe I do not even see that, but only notice the shapes on the dial; or I see nothing. On the other hand, I may be seeing clocks potentially, and then I allow myself to hallucinate a clock, doing so because I have evidence that an actual clock is there to be seen, so when I perceive the actual clock I have already been through a complex process that originated in me. So when I see the clock I create it, and when I see the time I create time too. Every moment I have my little experience of omnipotence, before I hand this uncomfortable function over to God.

There is some antilogic here. Logic takes the form at one point of unlogic. I can't help this – this is actual. I want to go into this matter.

The infant becomes ready to find a world of objects and ideas, and, at the pace of growth of this aspect of the baby, the mother is presenting the world to the baby. In this way, by her high degree of adaptation at the beginning, the mother enables the baby to experience omnipotence, to actually find what he creates, to create and link this up with what is actual. The nett result is that each baby starts up with a new creation of the world. And on the seventh day we hope that he is pleased and takes a rest. This is when things go reasonably well, as, in fact, they usually do; but someone has to be there if that which is created is to be realized, actual. If no one is there to do this, then, in the extreme, the child is autistic – creative into space – and boringly compliant in relationships (childhood schizophrenia).

Then the Reality Principle may be gradually introduced, and the child who has known omnipotence experiences the limitations that the world imposes. But by that time he or she

is able to live vicariously, to use projection and introjection mechanisms, to let the other person be the manager sometimes, and to hand over omnipotence. Eventually the individual human being relinquishes being the wheel, or the whole gearbox, and adopts the more comfortable position of a cog. Help me to write a humanist hymn:

O! to be a cog
 O! to stand collectively
 O! to work harmoniously with others
 O! to be married without losing the
idea of being the creator of the world.

The human individual who does not start off with an experience of omnipotence has no chance to be a cog, but must go on pushing round omnipotence and creativeness and control, like trying to sell unwanted shares in a bogus company.

In my writings I have made a lot of the concept of the transitional object: something your child may be clutching on to just now, perhaps a bit of cloth that once belonged to the cot-cover, or was a blanket or mother's hair-ribbon. It is a first symbol, and it stands for confidence in the union of baby and mother based on the experience of the mother's reliability and capacity to know what the baby needs through identification with the baby. I have said this object was created by the baby; we know we will never challenge this, although we also know it was there before the baby created it. (It may even have been created in the same way by a sibling.)

Not 'Ask and it shall be given,' so much as 'Reach out and it shall be there for you to have, to use, to waste.' This is the beginning. It must be lost in the process of the introduction of the actual world, of the Reality Principle, but in health we devise ways and means for recapturing the feeling of meaningfulness that comes from creative living. The symptom of uncreative living is the feeling that nothing means anything, of futility, I couldn't care less.

We are now in a position to look at creative living, and in so doing to use a consistent theory. The theory allows us to see some of the reason why the subject of creative living is inherently difficult. We can look at the generality or at the details of which creative living is composed.

It will be understood that I am trying to get to a layer that is somewhat deep if not actually fundamental. I know that one way of cooking sausages is to look up the exact directions in Mrs Beeton (or Clement Freud on Sundays) and another way is to take some sausages and somehow to cook sausages for the first time ever. The result may be the same on any one occasion, but it is more pleasant to live with the creative cook, even if sometimes there is a disaster or the taste is funny and one suspects the worst. The thing I am trying to say is that *for the cook* the two experiences are different: the slavish one who complies gets nothing from the experience except an increase in the feeling of dependence on authority, while the original one feels more real, and surprises herself (or himself) by what turns up in the mind in the course of the act of cooking. When we are surprised at ourselves, we are being creative, and we find we can trust our own unexpected originality. We shall not mind if those who consume the sausages fail to notice the surprising thing that was in the cooking of them, or if they do not show gustatory appreciation.

I believe there is nothing that has to be done that cannot be done creatively, if the person is creative or has that capacity. But if someone is all the time threatened by creative extinction, then either the boring compliance has to be endured or else originality has to be piled on until the sausages come out looking like something out of this world or tasting like a garbage bin.

I believe it is true, as I have already indicated, that however poor the individual's equipment, experience can be creative and can be felt to be exciting in the sense that there is always something new and unexpected in the air. Of course, if the person is highly individual and talented, their drawing may

be worth £20,000, but for those who are not Picassos, it would be slavish imitation and non-creative to draw like Picasso. To draw like Picasso one has to be Picasso – else it is uncreative. The hangers-on in a coterie are by definition compliant and boring except so far as they were seeking something and needed Picasso's courage for support in being original.

The fact is that what we create is already there, but the creativeness lies in the way we get at perception through conception and apperception. So when I look at the clock, as I must do now, I create a clock, but I am careful not to see clocks except just where I already know there is one. Please do not turn down this piece of absurd unlogic – but look at it and use it.

To help matters, may I say that if it is getting dark, and if I am exhausted, or a bit schizoid anyway, I may see clocks where there are none. I may see something on the wall over there and even read the time on its dial, and you could tell me that it's just a shadow thrown on a wall by someone's head.

For some, the chance of being found to be mad, hallucinated, makes them stick to sanity, and to objectivity of the kind that could be called shared actuality. Also, others allow themselves to pretend too well that what they imagine is actual and able to be shared.

We can allow all kinds of people to live with us in the world, but we need the others to be objective if we are to enjoy our creativeness and take risks and follow up our impulses with the creative ideas that go with them.

Some children have to grow up in an atmosphere of glorious creative living which belongs to a parent or a nurse, but not to the children. This stifles them and they cease to be. Or they develop a technique of withdrawal.

There is a whole vast subject of the provision of opportunity for children to live their own lives both at home and at school, and it is an axiom that children who easily feel they exist in their own right are the very ones who are easy to

manage. These are the ones who are not insulted right, left and centre by the operation of the Reality Principle.

If we are formally joined with partners, we may allow all manner and all degrees (as I have said) of projections and introjections, and a wife may enjoy her husband's enjoyment of his work or a husband enjoy his wife's experiences with the frying pan. So in that way marriage – formal union – widens our scope for creative living. You may be creative by proxy while you are doing a chore that gets done more quickly if you can do it as it says on the label of the bottle.

I wonder how you are getting on with these ideas that I have written down, and that I have read. The first thing is that I cannot make you creative by talking at you. I would do better by listening than by talking. If you have not had or have lost the capacity for surprising yourself in your living experiences, then I cannot give any help by talking, and you would be difficult to help by psychotherapy. But it is important that we know of others (especially children for whom we may be responsible) that experience of creative living is always more important for the individual than doing well.

What I do want to make clear is that creative living involves, in every detail of its experience, a philosophical dilemma – because, in fact, in our sanity we only create what we find. Even in the arts we cannot be creative into the blue unless we are having a solo experience in a mental hospital or in the asylum of our own autism. Being creative in art form or in philosophy depends very much on the study of all that exists already, and the study of the milieu is a clue to the understanding and appreciation of every artist. But the creative approach makes the artist feel real and significant, even when what he does is a failure from the point of view of the public, although the public remains as necessary a part of his equipment as his talents, his training and his tools.

So my claim is that in so far as we are fairly healthy personally, we do not have to live in a world created by our marriage partner and our marriage partner does not have to live in ours. Each of us has his or her own private world, and,

moreover, we learn to share experiences by use of all degrees of cross-identifications. Where we are bringing up children or starting babies off as creative individuals in a world of actual facts, we do have to be uncreative and compliant and adaptive; but, on the whole, we get round this and find it does not kill us because of our identification with these new people who need us if they too are to achieve creative living.

Sum, I Am

A talk given to the Association of Teachers of Mathematics during their Easter Conference at Whitelands, Putney, London, 17 April 1968

Certainly it would be good here and now for me to stick to my last, which is child psychiatry and the theory of the emotional development of the child that belongs to psychoanalysis and therefore ultimately to Freud. In my own job *I do know something*, and I have expertise and I have accumulated experience. In the areas of mathematics and of teaching I am a *greenhorn*. Your newest student knows more than I do. Certainly I would not have accepted Mr Tahta's and your invitation, except that in his initial letter he seemed to know that I belong to an alien speciality, and that he could only expect from me a comment on the ecology of the particular garden that I happen to cultivate.

I am even frightened of my title '*Sum, I am*', lest it be thought that I am a classics scholar or a master of etymology. Pressed for a title some months ago, I thought, 'Well, I shall be talking about the stage of *I am* in individual development, and so it might be legitimate to link this with the Latin word *sum*.' 'You catch the paronomasia . . .?' (That's Calverley, but not to think I'm erudite either.)

My job is definitely to be myself. What bit of myself can I give you, and how can I give you a bit without seeming to lack wholeness? I must assume that you can allow me a wholeness and some degree of that form of maturation that we call integration, and I must choose to show you just one