Transformation, Creativity and Some of the Things I Have Learned

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Personal transformation is a process that we all go through. As a social worker, when I talk to clients about change, there are a couple of aspects that I always try to address with them. The fact that they need services is challenging, and it is consequential for them to move forward with their eyes wide open and understanding. First, I want them to realize that change is hard. If you have been doing a behavior for the last 20 years, making a change is difficult. In the college courses I teach for social work students, I remind them that these clients didn?t come in the first time that they needed some help. They have been attempting to make changes in their lives for a long time and continually failing prior to seeking outside support. Skinner (1953)terms extinction burst, which is the increase of a behavior as the behavior is being stopped. The concept of an extinction burst is one I have often broached with parents attempting to change to problematic behaviors their children are demonstrating. I explain that as they make changes in parenting style, start enforcing rules, and begin to work to modify that behavior, things often might get worse before they get better.

Changing any types of habits we have in our lives is really challenging. The second thing I always want to discuss with my clients is that it takes consistency and dedication. We often fail when we attempt to make changes in our lives. We learn to do behaviors and act in a particular way by doing it over time. I recently quit smoking cigarettes. I started smoking when I was about 14. Now that I am 37, and have smoked for about 20 years, I have smoked more than half of my life. Years ago, I tried to quit a couple of times, but kept picking them back up. I remember at one point saying "I quit quitting because I don't like failing." As the lockdown started due to COVID-19 this year, I got the most sick I ever been with an acute reactive airway disease.

In the span of about a month and a half, I had gone to the doctors five times, mostly urgent care and some virtual visits. I was prescribed medications that helped for a period of time, but then they stopped being as useful. I had several times that I though I was going to have to go to the hospital due to my shortness of breath. I was afraid I would end up being admitted and would die in the hospital alone if this happened. I asked for help from my provider and was prescribed Chantix, which has been incredibly helpful in taking away some of the cravings for nicotine and have not smoked now in the last three weeks.

This change in my life has been a radical or transformative change. Understanding types of changes is a third thing I always try to impart to my clients. There are times in our lives, or with behaviors that there is a complete change or that many aspects of our lives change simultaneously. Change can happen in both minor and major scales. I encourage my social work students to keep their eyes open for both major changes, but also towards minor changes or even change language. Sometimes making small changes in a positive direction is a significant accomplishment. Miller and Rollnick (2013), in the authoritative text on the therapeutic technique of motivational interviewing, talk about nudging clients little bit by little bit to get them more ready and willing to make a change in their lives.

I have experienced both the transformational type of change and the steady but small changes in my life. When I was 19 and went to finish my extended high school career at a boys ranch/boarding school, I made significant changes in my life. I stopped using drugs and changed the trajectory of my life. I have many times made small but significant changes in my life. A couple of years ago, I started slowly losing weight because I decided that I was going to go for a walk every night. I still do this through any weather, and even as I was sick through shortened excursions due to difficulties breathing, but almost every night, I go for a walk. This change has been pretty minor in terms of a time commitment (it just takes 30 minutes),but my consistency and commitment have led to major changes in my life over a long period of time.

Change frequently comes out of hardship and adversity. As we put things into the fire of life, it changes their composition and how they are. Sometimes the fire burns away aspects of a life, and other times it makes metal malleable.

There have been numerous studies on positive changes coming from adversity. Linley and Joseph (2004) provide a meta review of many of these discourses. It is important to remember that adversity does not always lead to positive changes. Linley and Jospeh provide a number of variables that have been looked at to determine if there will be a favorable outcome. The person experiencing the adversity's cognitive appraisal of the event, their sociodemographic factors and personality can all play a part in their outcomes. The social support, religious connections, and even the ways in which they cope also impact the long-term impact of the adverse event and if there are positive changes that happen. As well, the actual psychological distress, the quality of life and the effect of the event along with the their cognitive processing of it also plays a role.

One positive outcome that can come from adversity and challenge is a creative response. Creativity allows for us to find ways to transform and make changes. In discussing creativity and personal transformation, Krausz (2009) describes creativity both as a process and a product. He states:

> The idea of a product is too restrictive. In contrast, we should substitute the idea of a work that is not restricted to thingliness. It allows for both a process and a product. It allows for bracketing a project such as self-transformation as one's work. It allows for a vocation as one's work; it allows for a personal relationship as one's work; it allows for one's life as one's work. No doubt, thingly products partly constitute one's life; they punctuate it; they serve as its signposts. But we need the more ample idea of a work or a 'life-work' to provide the normative context in virtue of which thingly products may have meaning and significance. It is in that larger notion of work that my personal program finds its place. (p. 202)

Aspects of Creativity

The creative work that we follow comes in many ways. Nachmanovitch (2014) *Free Play*, which discusses creativity and improvisation, describes some of the hopes of his book. He states that he want it to "serve as a block-buster, a wedge for breaking apart creative blocks... The only way out of the complexity is through it. Ultimately, the only techniques that can help us are those we invent ourselves" (para. 22). This paper attempts to examine some of the aspects of creativity, although not provide a comprehensive understanding, and areas that we might find creativity. Through this understanding of creativity, we might make some personal transformations. Creativity provides a connection with the divine. There are personal aspects of creativity that we can take on. In practicing activities such as social virtuosity,

improvisation, and remixing we can employ creative interactions within our lives.

Creativity and the Connection with the Divine

This concept of creativity as a work and losing some of the thingness of it, allows us to see two aspects of creativity. This creativity can be seen both at a cosmic level and individually. Fox (2002) describes creativity as something we can all tap into, and that creativity is connected to the divine. He says:

> Creativity is not a noun or even a verb; it is a place, a space, a gathering, a union, a where; wherein the Divine powers of creativity and the human power of imagination join forces. Where the two come together is where beauty and grace happen and, indeed, explode. Creativity constitutes the ultimate in intimacy, for it is the place where the divine and the human are most destined to interact (p. 4).

This connection is not just focused on specific religious tradition, but about more existential connection with spirituality. My own spiritual connection has gone through a number of different stages (Campbell, 2020b). Considering creativity in the light of this, as a way of connecting with the divine has helped open up my understanding of spirituality and the divine to move away from a strictly religiously connected mindset to a sense of spirituality. I've not been exposed frequently to literature that sees the various religious beliefs as connected and sharing similar messages. The fact that creativity fits within a Christian tradition and in relationship to Jesus, but also through interrelated spiritual leaders like Buddha and others helps us to understand the divine and spirituality.

This connection with the divine can both be from the product that is produced and within the actual time of and flow of the creation that happens. This creative approach and way of being does not always come naturally. There are aspects that we can consider and think about in relationship to our personal creativity.

Personal Creativity

Some professions are traditionally considered creative, such as musicians and artists. In reality, there can be creativity in all that we do. Just as we can connect with the divine through creativity, we can engage in it through many different avenues. In my work practice, coming up with innovative solutions for complicated and challenging issues that face my clients can be creative. Lee (2008) describes both the importance of creativity in the implementation of our clinical practice. It is also our role to help foster creativity for the clients who we work with. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) describes ten traits that are present in creative people. These

antithetical traits are paradoxical and have dialectical tension. He lists ten characteristics that creative people have: (1) have a great deal of physical energy, but they're also often quiet and at rest; (2) smart yet naive at the same time; (3) combine playfulness and discipline, or responsibility and irresponsibility; (4) alternate between imagination and fantasy, and a rooted sense of reality, (5) both extroverted and introverted; (6) humble and proud at the same time; (7) escape rigid gender role stereotyping; (8) rebellious and conservative; (9) passionate about their work, yet they can be extremely objective about it as well; and (10) openness and sensitivity often exposes them to suffering and pain, yet also to a great deal of enjoyment.

We can examine each of these traits and viewpoints not of the world and comparing them to our own. Can I examine my own understanding of gender stereotyping? What are ways as a male that I can be more sensitive and less aggressive or how can girls be more dominate and tough. Finding ways to develop a psychological androgyny might make me more able to have a higher set of responses to pull from and set of strengths (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

In the search for a strong set of personal creativity, I need to be careful to not get into what Moore (1993) describes as a creative pose. He discusses the consulting work he has done with artists, and how some have taken solely a pose of being creative without doing the actual work. Moore describes one client who had a specially built office to write, with everything you could want to spur on writing. He explained that he would sit in his office, but never write a single word. I find that I have to work towards not just posing as though I?m being creative, but actually doing the thing.

This concept of the creative pose is an easy trap to get ensnared in. One of the podcasts I have been listening to the longest is "Back to Work" Back to Work by Merlin Mann and Dan Benjamin (2011 - Present). I previously reported it as one of my favorite podcast's (Campbell, 2014). As host's that talk about a little bit of everything, from comic books to work productivity, a theme that comes up many times is being more interested in the process or tools than the work itself. If we are talking about a system for managing tasks, we might focus more on the app that we are going to use, or in thinking about how we are going to organize those tasks, or what font we are going to use to make things look right. One way they frame this topic is as productivity porn.

To describe pornography as a phenomenon, loosely it is images and videos depicting people having sexual encounters. It can be arousing to watch but disconnected from the act of participating in the sexual encounters that it is recording. I would define productivity/creativity porn as focusing on the aesthetic or the tools used in the implementation. This focus is voyeuristic and looks at the surface and not the actual work or creative processes happening. As somebody who has enjoyed using creativity to make video's, I can spend all of my time fantasizing about what I could do if I had a better tool (maybe a dedicated camera, or an improved sound recording device, or lighting). My video production would be improved if I had these elements, and they are good things to have. The problem is, if I start telling myself that I can not produce any videos because I don't have these things, then I won't ever create anything. Often, it seems that it better to produce something. The more that we can get out there and do the creative thing the more we can improve our skill at it.

Creativity and Social Virtuosity. "Jazz/zen improvisation: "Social virtuosity" and practice" (2013) gives discussion regarding Hershock (1996) proposal of "social virtuosity," and its relationship and connection to practice. This concept is described as an attunement to the needs of others and being able and willing to respond. This response can be spontaneous and allow for harmony in social discourse.

In these unprecedented times, due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, it seems apparent that there is a great need for people to be able to practice social virtuosity. Just as the author describes, when we can have this interconnected relationship can enhance our world. This enhancement needs to happen within our homes, within our communities, states, countries, and globally.

I feel some remorse that I haven't been doing more in the community. I have many colleagues that are offering therapeutic supports via video conferencing services. I'm amazed at people who are helping their communities out, just like McCue (2020) described. I feel like I am just trying to get the things I need to do done, but not making any meaningful addition to people outside of my immediate circle. It seems as we move forward, we will have a number of opportunities to find new and innovative ways to shape the new normal that we follow. My creative project for this course was considering this (see Campbell, 2020a). It was a video I created to encourage a cooperative transformation in how we interact and consider each other. There is a need for us to come together, to improvise, and to make a new normal.

I find making videos to be fun to produce, but they are incredibly time-consuming for me to put together. Just like the Should I Be Practicing Right Now (Wells, 2011) chart that was posted in the Jazz/Zen Improvisation article, I should be practicing. I should be practicing how to continue to support my family. I should be practicing how I can help my students and make meaningful contributions to my studies. I should be practicing how to adapt and improvise in a way that can be social virtuous.

Improvisation and Creativity. Social virtuosity is a type of improvisation. Nachmanovitch (2014) provides a great look into improvisation with examples from scholars, mystics, and his personal experiences. He describes some of the foundation of where creativity and improvisation are derived. There is also discussion about the type of activity or work that is being done, and what can come out of it.

The Buddhist state of samadhi, which can be described as selfless, absorbed, and using absolute concentration (Nachmonovitch, 2014) is a way of disappearing into the creative work we are doing. This interrelated topic connects us with the divine. It also seems very much an experience akin to what Csikszentmihalyi (2014) describes as flow experiences "the well-ordered, fully functioning dynamic state of consciousness" (p. 216). It is in this state that improvisation and newness is happening.

Creativity and improvisation can also have a problematic nature to it. Nachmanovitch (2014) likens it to the oyster's creation of pearls. When we are creating, we will make mistakes. Sometimes these accidental things we have done that allow us to see things in a new way. That one of the powers of mistakes will enable us to reframe blocks and change our way of thinking creatively. For me, there are times when I am creating digital art of some form. I will recreate the same idea over and over, each time modifying what I am doing. It is through this iterative process that I end up stumbling onto the final way I want to display my project.

I hope to find more opportunities and ways to play. I can tend to be pretty focused in my life in the pleasure of attaining something and can miss out on the German word that Nachmanovitch (2014) offers, funktionslust, as they please or producing an effect or doing. To be able to dive further into the muse of my inner child.

Remixing as creativity. The act of creation is about building upon what others have done. It is an interaction and connection. DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid (2004), describes Duchamp's lecture in 1959 "Creative Act" as stating "the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act." There is a building on each other, improvising together, connectedness that happens when we are creating.

Impact of Course Practices

Being able to participate in this course has been extremely beneficial for me. There has been growth and change in me. It has also been helpful based on the timing of the course and all of the outside circumstances of COVID-19. Not only have the traditional scholarly activities of reading and writing been a place for my growth and continuation of honing my skills. There has been a great deal of extremely interesting and engaging videos that we have been able to watch.

The idea of being able to work through this material both individually, in groups, and a partnered experience has been especially beneficial. It has been a learning experience to hear other's perspectives and get to participate in online dialogue regarding these topics. Individually doing the mediation activity for me has been especially helpful. The first couple of times I put on the audio track, I fell asleep. I think

this is a sign of my problems with not sleeping enough, but also the struggle for adjustment. I don't have any experience doing a meditative practice. When I was younger, I had some form of contemplative practice (through being alone, reading, journaling), I've not ever meditated. I've attempted to implement mindfulness, but mostly through focused minutes of being aware of where and when I am.

Going through the anxieties and worries associated with the current pandemic, taking time to quiet my mind has been beneficial. There have been times that I have been worried and stressed and felt relieved after having gone through the listening experience. There have been times that I have done it before and after working and felt rejuvenated. There have been times that I felt connected. While I don't think I have consistently done it at least three times a week, as is the expectation, it has been constructive for me.

Pulling cards from Padma (1994)'s Osho Zen Tarot deck each week has felt like a kind of tent pole for me in this course . It is an activity that I did last semester as well. It has felt like it gives stability and concrete action that I can do to move forward in this course. If I'm a bit stuck or unsure what to do next, I can move to grab the deck and pulling a card. I find it cathartic to consider how the card relates to my life and almost a way of learning about the topic of Zen or what my understanding is a type of Buddhism. Often, the concepts or mentalities portrayed in the cards are new for me and engaging to consider.

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