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Mind Tools: Applications and Solutions

Artistic Process and Elegant Action

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There is an approach to problem solving that complements the scientific method and facilitates progress and innovation. Let us call it *artistic process*.

Although aesthetic in nature, it is not confined to the arts, nor is it always present in them. Artistic process transcends subject area. Apply it to any endeavor and that endeavor will *become* an art—a vehicle for awakening insight.

At its core, artistic process blends emotion with the disciplined pursuit of quality. It begins with *resonance*, a feeling of close kinship with some medium of human activity—maybe commerce, medicine, mathematics, athletics, music or public service. Finding our resonant medium is a private undertaking, made easier when we have the freedom to explore our fascinations and the encouragement to do so.

Resonance with a medium motivates us to pursue *quality* in our relationship with it. In this pursuit we seek to skillfully transform the medium from its present, imperfect state into an ideal state seen in the imagination. The struggle to bring about an ideal state through elegant action underlies all true art.

Initially, we lack the skills needed to create this ideal state, and we may not know how to acquire them. Finding ourselves stuck, we turn to others for instruction.

Their guidance will advance us, but in the end it can only elevate our skills to the commonplace. Somewhere down the line it will prove inadequate; quality will demand refined skills that no one can give us.

At this point, we must face a difficult truth: The ultimate source of quality can only be found *within* us. The acceptance of this truth is a prerequisite to serious artistic accomplishment. Our sole remaining option is to turn inward and build *an alliance with the unconscious*. To do this we must develop several mental disciplines:

- **Contemplation.** To contemplate is to open ourselves to the stream of perceptions, imaginings and actions that spontaneously arise as we work to conform our medium to our ideal. This stream, flowing autonomously into awareness from a source beyond rational control, can restructure our inadequate, conscious understanding of the problem before us.

- **Observation.** To observe objectively is to register without censorship these emerging perceptions, imaginings and actions—paying close attention to them and recording them for later consideration. We tend to banish unsettling information from consciousness. A musician, for example, may know that he has just played a succession of wrong notes, but be unaware of exactly what notes he played. The repressed details of his errors may be precisely the information he needs to improve his performance. Objective, dispassionate observation of one's own automatic behaviors renders the boundary between consciousness and unconsciousness permeable, allowing useful information to enter into awareness.

• **Organization.** To organize is to arrange the observed products of our contemplation into meaningful patterns. Toying with the elements to find their possible combinations and interrelations often sheds light on a problem.

• **Perseverance.** To persevere is to contemplate, observe and organize over and over again. The contents of any single observation may seem random to us, but the contents of all our observations taken together can reveal significant patterns. Whether we discover a pattern or miss it is often determined by the number of observations we make.

These four disciplines, practiced consistently, will eventually disclose our medium's intrinsic nature. Acting in harmony with that nature, we will acquire *technique*—the capacity for elegant action.

In addition to technique, artistic process bestows two other benefits.

First, it leads to a *systems perspective* of the world. Through continual contemplation, observation, and organization we uncover ever more subtle relationships, both within the materials of our medium and between those materials and ourselves; relationships that we can utilize to attain our ideal. Gradually, we acquire a more general insight: each situation is a system of interrelated elements; each element has a structural function within the whole; collectively, the functions determine the overall situation. To change a situation, then, we must change the relationships that give rise to it. And to do that effectively, we first must discover how its elements are *functioning*.

Second, artistic process leads to greater *self-understanding*. As we work with our medium, the aspects of it that dominate our attention from moment to moment are selected unconsciously. To observe something *outside* us is simultaneously to observe something *within* us. Our perceptions include reflections of our inner selves—metaphorical elements that are psychologically relevant to us. As we come to recognize this, the disciplines of artistic process contribute to our emotional maturity and well-being.

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