Creating

(Adapted from an article by Robert Fritz, used with permission)

Why is it that some people don't learn how to create what they truly want to create? There are a few interesting reasons:

First of all, most people have not been trained in the skills of the creative process. It doesn't sound like a centerpiece of mainstream education like maths, science, or language skills. Yet the creative process is the most successful process for accomplishment in the history of civilisation. It has created all of the arts, most of science and technology, pop culture, literature and poetry, and it has fuelled invention and innovation in business and organisations.

Can it be understood? Can it be taught? The happy answer to both questions is yes. But before we can begin to do it, we need to think differently about our goals, our relationship to success or failure, and the nature of discipline and momentum.

Structural Tension: The Key

The key to the creative process is structural tension. Whenever we establish a tension, it strives for resolution. Structural tension is established through contrast: between our desired state (our goals, aspirations, desires) and our current reality in relationship to those goals. We can move toward resolving the tension by taking actions that bring our goals and reality closer together. The ultimate resolution happens when we accomplish our goals. Moving toward our goals sounds simple, but requires the development of many skills.

Discipline

All disciplines are unnatural. That's why they are disciplines. When we have an itch, it is natural to scratch. It takes discipline not to scratch. In establishing structural tension, it takes discipline to define the actual end result we want to create, and to define reality objectively, outside the distortions of our assumptions, theories, and concepts. It takes discipline to confront moments that are filled with frustration, disappointment and setbacks. Without a discipline for establishing and maintaining structural tension, it's very difficult to accomplish any great mastery. Every time the situation becomes uncomfortable—for example when you face rejection—you will be prone to give up. By contrast, if you operate with a discipline based on what you genuinely want, you may still feel disappointment, but you are less likely to give up.

Thinking about What we Want

When my colleagues and I first started teaching adults the creative process back in the 1970's, many people had a lot of trouble answering this simple question: What do you want? Instead of considering what they actually wanted, they would attempt to describe what they thought they should want, or they would name the elimination of problems as what they said they wanted, or they would use vague slogans, or they would think about processes rather than what the processes were supposed to produce. The situation was all rather puzzling at first, until the obvious became obvious: A lot of people don't know how to think about what they want. They have had the subject so drummed out of their brains that it's as if they can't think about certain ideas because they don't know the right questions to ask. Too many young people are taught to give up their dreams before they have had any experience attempting to pursue meaningful goals. This happens, paradoxically, because we love them, and we don't want to see them suffer. Our tendency is to protect them and control them, so they will be saved from the emotional upheaval that disappointment can bring. To protect them from disappointment, adults inadvertently censor young people not only from trying to create what might matter to them, but from even thinking about trying.
It Begins with a Question

The creative process begins with this deceivingly simple question: What do you want to create? When we get into the habit of defining our goals, visions, and aspirations, we are developing a true skill—a skill that people need to learn if they are to master their life-building process.

Defining goals is a good beginning to have in place, but only a beginning. The next step is even harder, and that is to describe current reality accurately and objectively.

Just the Facts

Most people learn to distort reality. They do so because reality often includes things they don't like. But without a fix on reality, they will not be able to know where they are in relation to their goals.

Learning requires the ability to evaluate our actions: Did they work? Did they not work? We need to consider two essential data points: the current state and our desired outcomes. The skill of evaluating the actual situation must be developed deliberately, because it is easy to distort reality when we don't like what there is to see. To develop this skill, people must be able to tolerate disappointment and frustration but not let those experiences stop them.

The Self-Esteem Trap

One of the concepts that has become popular over the past twenty years is the idea that in order to be successful in life, one must have high self-esteem. This is simply not the case! If we read the biographies of some of the most successful people in history, we find that a majority of them had grave doubts about themselves but still were able to achieve their aspirations and influence the world. The question of self-esteem is independent from your ability to create what most matters to you in your life.

When we are creating something, we have one of two places we can place our focus: on ourselves or on the object of our creation. These different points of focus lead to very different possibilities. If the focus is on us, then our performance becomes a reflection of our identity, and our worth becomes tied to how well we did. The purpose of any action becomes "what it says about me" rather than "how well it supports my accomplishment of my goals."

In the real world, learning often includes being pretty bad at something before it is possible to be competent. How can people tolerate being inept on the way to mastering new skills and abilities if their focus is on themselves? Most successful people learn that self-esteem and self-opinion are totally irrelevant when it comes to creating what matters to them in their lives. "Take what you do, but not yourself, seriously," is the oft-quoted phrase.

The Lesson of Action

Once we have established the desired outcomes we want, and the current reality we have, the next natural step is to act. There is a feedback system that kicks in when we act within the context of structural tension: action produces results that are evaluated ("How well did the actions move us toward our goal?"), which leads to adjustments of future actions. This feedback system continues until the goal is accomplished. Some of the best life learning takes place within this context, because the lesson is both specific to the actual goal that is being pursued, and the general understanding that the person can learn what is needed to learn.