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# The Riddle

**Where Ideas Come From and How to  
Have Better Ones**

Andrew Razeghi

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Razeghi, Andrew.

The riddle : where ideas come from and how to have better ones / Andrew Razeghi.—1st ed.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7879-9632-1 (cloth)

1. Creative ability. 2. Creative ability in business. I. Title. II. Title: Where ideas come from and how to have better ones.

BF408.R244 2008

153.3'5—dc22

2007038036

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*To the problem solvers*



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# INTRODUCTION: THE INNOVATION LAMENT

Have you ever had a problem you couldn't figure out no matter how hard you tried? Someone likely advised you, now clearly stumped, "Take a break. Don't think so hard." And so you did. And then, on waking up, while in the shower, or while stuck in traffic, it happened: you had a great idea. "Aha!" you said. "I've got it! I've figured it out!" This book is about that moment: why it happens, how it happens, and what you can do to make it happen more often. Welcome to *The Riddle*.

The riddle I am referring to is the conundrum that is the creative process: how we go about the journey into the origins of the so-called Eureka! moment: that magical split second in which a great idea holds a surprise party for your brain. It is during this mysterious adrenalin-charged moment that problems are solved, ideas are born, and inspiration soars. This blinding glimpse of unexpected brilliance is the siren's song of artists, designers, entrepreneurs, inventors, marketers, product developers, songwriters, and all those charged with the nearly impossible task of creating novel solutions to existing problems on an ongoing basis. By isolating and understanding what leads up to this ephemeral event, you will be better equipped to generate creative ideas deliberately rather than accidentally.

Isolating the eureka moment is not easy to do for a few key reasons. First, we do not actively screen people for creativity; rather, we tend to subjectively discriminate between those who are creative and those who are not. It is widely believed that those who are considered creative are somehow cosmically gifted versus deliberate about their success. Therefore, this categorization—"you've got it or you don't"—assumes that creativity cannot be learned and stymies attempts at understanding the creative process, including the origin of ideas. However, could it be that creative acts are not

as random as they appear? Is underlying logic involved? Second, although almost everyone has experienced a eureka moment, we often do not recognize the underlying cognitive processes at work just prior to the moment; rather, we tend to recall only the moment itself. Our fascination with and enthusiasm about the ideas that are the outcomes of the creative process overshadows our understanding of why we had the big ideas in the first place and how to replicate what seems to be a random event. However, what if you were to replicate the events that precede the exact moment you had your last big idea? Could you learn to become deliberately, rather than accidentally, creative? And third, because of its mythical status, creativity is largely misunderstood, so we tend to excuse away our lack of success rather than attempt to understand and apply the logic that governs the creative process. This misunderstanding is compounded by the multitude of definitions of creativity. However, what if you were to learn to be more deliberate about creativity rather than waiting for divine inspiration? Could you increase your odds of success at innovation?

First, let's explore screening for creativity. Since writing my last book, I have been revisited occasionally by a remark that the financial services innovator Charles Schwab made to me. While he and I were discussing the topic of how to improve schools in order to better prepare our future leaders, he shared with me a conversation he had had with the dean of a Bay Area business school. The dean asked Schwab how the school might improve business education, and Schwab responded with something along the lines of, "The problem with you business school guys is that it is all about scores and boxes." By "scores and boxes," Schwab was referring to standardized tests, grade point averages, and other assorted clinical academic examinations. And by "you guys," he was referring to teachers and school administrators of the world.

Although standardized tests certainly play a vital role in our education system, the fundamental problem with scores and boxes from a creativity standpoint is relatively simple: the business of creativity is largely the business of thinking outside boxes, not

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filling them in. Even with changes to standardized tests, including the addition of written essays, they still do not account for or measure creativity, and herein is the great irony of standardized tests, particularly those used to assess business world aptitude: the business world revolves around creativity. New wealth flows to those who successfully introduce new products, new services, and new business models. Although those who design and administer standardized tests make no claims to test for creativity (in fact, they advertise that they do *not* test for creativity or motivation, for that matter), neither do most of the other measures used to assess a student's potential performance, including grade point average. Incidentally, it's not that there aren't tests available for measuring creativity because there are; rather, we don't use them as widely as we do tests for intelligence. Some would argue that a student's creative capacity can be gleaned by virtue of his or her extracurricular involvement, although I would contend that these activities are more often a better measure of a student's leadership aptitudes than creative skills. Nonetheless, I don't mean to harp on standardized tests alone because they are not the only contributors to the creativity crisis.

The responsibility for mitigating this crisis falls squarely on the shoulders of the field in which I work: innovation. Like all other fields, ours would benefit from a shared understanding or practical framework for comprehending and teaching creativity. This includes a rigorous understanding of the psychology of creative genius, as well as a comprehensive examination into the origin of ideas. However, this presents a challenge: even those of us who study creativity and innovation do not entirely understand the psychology of creative genius, although we do have informed opinions and a litany of academic studies to confirm those opinions. In fact, the greatest advantage within our field is that innovation is really not much of a field at all. Quite the contrary: we are a bit of a motley crew of artists, architects, behavioral psychologists, cognitive neuroscientists, inventors, musicians, mechanical engineers, product designers, social scientists, software engineers, and the

occasional lunatic. Our diversity is our calling card. As creativity scholar Edward de Bono theorized decades ago, lateral thinking (the ability to think across conventionally drawn boundaries) is the foundation of creative insight. However, the challenge associated with our unique advantage is that we have no real operating models for managing the fuzzy front end that is creative insight, that is, the source of great ideas, and this is as true of individuals as it is of organizations. Lacking a framework for logically organizing creativity, individuals resort to all sorts of rituals in order to conjure up big ideas. From long walks to hot baths, we attempt to conjure up inspiration like clairvoyants channeling dead relatives. We'd like to believe it works, although we can't explain it.

Individuals are not the only ones in pursuit of a meaningful point of difference. Organizations invest heavily in the pursuit of new ideas, although they tend to be a bit more organized in their effort. Once they've identified ideas, many organizations have structured processes for moving ideas toward the desired reality of sales. Among these processes are a variety of innovation funnels and endless variations on the popular and pragmatic Stage-Gate process for managing new product development. However, in the light of such processes, random or deliberate, the innovation lament remains the same: Where will the next big idea come from? In order to answer this question, we must first understand how individuals are inspired before we can help organizations become inspired. In order to fashion a brave new world of creative problem solvers, we need to start a new conversation about creativity. We need to rethink *thinking differently*.

Beyond the profession of innovation, creativity is at best an afterthought in schools. Outside of business curriculums, it is taught as an artistic endeavor. And even within business curriculums, it is often taught as an elective course. I believe this is because applied creativity, or innovation, has not yet matured as a business discipline on par with, say, accounting or marketing. Innovation is spread across disciplines: marketing, manufacturing, organizational development, leadership, and so on. Yet there is no connective tissue. There are those like myself who teach individuals

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and organizations how to incubate and introduce new ideas to the world by virtue of new products, new services, and entirely new businesses, but there really is no such thing as a certified innovation expert or a master's degree in conceptual creativity; at least there are no such designations recognized as broadly as a Certified Public Accountant or even a certified Real Estate Agent. The field of innovation is not alone in this regard. All fields that have yet to mature to discipline status often suffer from a similar identity challenge. Because of the immaturity of our discipline, promulgated by a lack of a cohesive framework, organizations suffer the result: students graduate ill prepared in the concepts, methods, and logic of creative problem solving. I believe that by understanding how to teach, test, and manage creativity more systematically, we will be better equipped to solve many of the world's most challenging problems.

The innovation "profession" and our education system are responsible for mitigating the creativity crisis, but so too are our organizations. I halfheartedly joke with clients that innovation as a discipline inside organizations is somewhere like a student between his sophomore and junior years in college: he's relatively homeless and still spending his parents' money. Within the context of corporate innovation efforts, funding often comes from any number of sources: the research and development budget, the marketing budget, or some amorphous discretionary budget set up to fund interesting ideas. Innovation often does not have its own piggybank or its own internal metrics (for example, there is no innovation internal rate of return) or any common requirements for what the teams that propose new ideas must "prove" or "disprove" in order to receive further funding.

As far as who owns the innovation agenda inside organizations, if you want to know where innovation lives inside any company, follow the money. Whoever funds it, owns it—both its success and failure.

Given the vagabond lifestyle that innovation leads in our world today, is it any wonder that a large majority of new ideas fail in the marketplace? What else would you expect from something

that is not taught, tested, organized, owned, or funded? A child born into a family of wolves would have a better chance of survival. However, I believe that failure is not required. This myth must be laid to rest. The reason that failure is often broached as a topic when people begin discussing innovation is that we are not organized about creativity. We believe it must be the result of a series of random and happy accidents. Herein is the crisis: there are sound reasons that new ideas fail, but the mantra about the need to “be willing to fail in order to succeed at innovation” has caused some significant problems.

First, no one wants to fail; more important, no one wants to be caught failing. Therefore, the lip-service paid to failure is rarely effective in actually creating behavioral changes in people. It sounds good from the podium but falls flat on its face in the boardroom.

Second, the failure myth has caused us to overlook the logic of creativity. Because “fail in order to win” has been preached so heavily, I believe we’ve given up before we’ve started. From my perspective, you do not need to fail in order to win at innovation. Individuals and organizations get lost only when they fail to travel with a compass and a map. The same is true in the search for new ideas. In the field of innovation, there are signposts, mile markers, and shortcuts to creative insight. You need to know how to recognize them in order to generate relevant solutions to problems on a more consistent basis. Among the tools explored throughout this book are precursors to creative insight: the behaviors and thought processes that often precede the birth of a big idea. By understanding how to apply these tools, you will be able to mitigate failure from your innovation efforts.

The third reason failure seems to be so prevalent in the field of innovation is the wholesale adoption of meaningless mantras, such as, “Think differently.” “Think differently” is as helpful to would-be innovators as “swing differently” is to golfers. Imagine if Tiger Woods were having a tough time on the golf course and his coach simply looked at him and said, “Tiger, you may want to

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try swinging differently.” The advice is virtually useless. If Tiger didn’t know better, how would he know whether he should swing more slowly, swing backward, or swing while standing on his head? The useful advice is *how* he should swing differently. We see this same thing occur with innovation. Organizations that are encouraged to “think differently” often follow the same path: they introduce a litany of new products and services that are unique, new to the world, headline grabbing—and absolutely useless. Although they delivered on the initial mandate to think differently, ultimately they failed. Thinking creatively does not require thinking differently; rather it requires thinking deliberately, that is, in specific ways, about a given situation, problem, or opportunity. At times it even requires paying attention to thoughts that seem unrelated to the task at hand. This involves cognitive skills that most people possess yet rarely exercise.

My ambition of this book is to help you learn to become more conceptually creative by illustrating how the events that lead up to the eureka moment can be replicated in order to innovate continuously. Contrary to popular opinion, creativity does not have to be a random process. There is logic to it. By considering the evidence and techniques that often give rise to great ideas, I believe that we can begin to mitigate the creativity crisis facing most organizations today.

*Crisis* may sound a bit alarmist. In fact, it is, although I am not the one sounding the alarm. The clanging sound you hear is that of an increasingly loud, crowded, and homogeneous marketplace in which we are forced to compete. According to a productivity study conducted by the Dallas Federal Reserve, product categories have exploded since 1970. Today we live in a world with over 64 different types of dental floss (up from 12 in 1970), 141 different over-the-counter pain relievers (up from 17), 43 different McDonald’s menu items (up from 13), and 285 brands of running shoes (167 men’s and 118 women’s, up from only 5 unisex models). You likely are able to name all 5 brands of running shoes that were on the market in 1970 (Adidas, Converse, New Balance, Nike,

and Puma). Now try naming the 280 other brands on the market. Because of the glut of new products that are relentlessly introduced week after week, there isn't an organization on the planet that is not desperately seeking solutions to unmet needs or attempting to find that next big idea in search of relevance.

In corporate conversations, the phrase "finding a meaningful point of difference" is as common as a falafel stand in Tel Aviv. The challenge is to find the right ideas, great ideas, ideas that create value. What inspires creative genius? One way in which to answer these questions is to ask people who have conjured up big ideas where those ideas came from. However, I have discovered that this approach is somewhat futile because most innovators are unable to recall exactly why they had the big idea. They can typically recall what they were doing just prior to the eureka moment as well as the moment they reached an impasse in search of a solution. However, rarely can they explain why it happened. By way of example, in response to my question about the source of his company's creative inspiration, a client of mine once observed, "That's a bit like asking, *What is love?* I don't know where it comes from, but you can feel it when it's right."

Much like relationships, there are laws of attraction in the field of innovation. Those who study innovation (academics) and those who succeed in the introduction of new ideas (entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, corporate innovators) can often predict with a relative degree of accuracy why an idea will likely fail, as well as the conditions under which it will likely succeed. One of the reasons that we are able to predict these sorts of things is that we have access to a large sample size of unsuccessful ideas and therefore have learned much from the mistakes of others. In fact, in order to teach my students how to use clues in order to predict the likelihood of success or failure of a given idea, the first thing I have my students do in the course I teach on innovation at Northwestern University is fail. Imagine: you've worked your entire life to succeed. You've been admitted to one of the leading business schools on the planet, and the first thing your professor has you

do is fail. Specifically, I give my students a failed product—one that they are to imagine they conjured up and launched. I then ask them to explain why they introduced it, why it failed, and what they would have done differently to relaunch, resurrect, or otherwise fix the idea. By the way, “kill the product” is an option, but it is rarely exercised. We cover the classics of failed products: Gerber’s Singles (baby food for adults), Motorola’s Iridium (satellite phones), Kleenex’s Avert Virucidal Tissues (tissues with germ-fighting power that conjured up unfortunate images of suicidal and homicidal germs), Ford Motor Company’s Edsel, and one of my personal favorites: Hey! There’s a Monster in My Room (monster spray for kids).

Why did Hey! fail? Think about it. It’s night. It’s dark outside. You’ve just given your child a bath, read him a book, and tucked him snuggly under the covers. Then just when the child thought he was safe and cozy in his room, you hand him a bottle and tell him to spray it. “Why?” he asks, and you respond, “Because, *Hey! There’s a monster in your room!*” Thanks for reinforcing the fear. Similar logic was at work in the case of Gerber Singles. Imagine: you’re single. It’s Saturday night, and you are home alone eating baby food out of a jar. How would this product make you feel? It deserved to fail, as did each of the other ideas.

If you are willing to listen, failure is the greatest teacher—although I suggest learning from someone else’s failure rather than your own. For example, by resurrecting an old, broken idea, Kleenex, twenty years after the failed launch of its Avert tissues, re-launched it with new technology and under a new name: Kleenex Anti-Viral Tissues. It has thus far succeeded in meeting the unmet needs of its customers by telling a more relevant story about the benefits of the product: do more than capture the germs expelled from a sneeze that travels at a rate of 320 kilometers per hour; kill them. The tissues claim to kill “99% of cold and flu viruses in the tissue before they spread.” Considering that a sneeze or cough can land viruses up to three feet away from the person who produced them and live on surfaces for up to twenty-four

hours, the idea sells. But why did its predecessor, Avert, bomb? It could have been the name. What does *virucidal* mean anyway? Or perhaps it was the fact that the tissues were impregnated with a Vitamin C derivative, leaving consumers wondering how “citrus” may feel when wiped onto one’s eyes. Either way, the fundamental problem remained: how to stop the spread of colds.

As Kleenex’s Avert and endless other cases have taught us, although the execution of the solution was problematic, the need remained. When Avert failed, the need remained unmet for at least two decades. Why? Imagine if you worked for the Kleenex brand between the years of 1985 (when Avert was launched) and 2005 (when Kleenex Anti-Viral was launched). Who would dare suggest the resurrection of a failed idea?

The reasons we often miss the big idea is not necessarily that we are afraid to fail; rather, we are not prepared to see that idea in the first place or have forgotten that someone, somewhere, and at some other point in time attempted to solve the very same problem and failed in the execution of the idea. If you want to succeed with creating the future, study the past, both success and failure: What went wrong? or Why did it work? What can you glean from that experience that may help you innovate once again? Otherwise, in lieu of a disciplined approach to eureka moments, you will stand in wonderment when in the presence of a great idea and ask that perennial question: “Why didn’t I think of that?”

The good news is that thinking creatively is a choice. You have control over it. And although the field of innovation has a long row to hoe before it takes its place alongside more established disciplines and although this book by no means attempts to solve the creativity crisis on its own, I view this is a starting point. In order to do so, it is first important to define creativity (as we’ll explore in detail in Chapter One). One of the fundamental problems I have recognized in my work in this field is that *creativity* and *applied creativity* (or innovation) mean many different things to many different people. From creating unique things to thinking outside the proverbial box, *innovation* is at best loosely defined.

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In order to help advance this conversation and subsequently the field of applied creativity, this book begins by distinguishing three fundamentally different forms of creativity: artistic creativity, scientific discovery, and conceptual creativity. As you'll soon learn, *The Riddle* is largely concerned with the most overlooked and often most misunderstood type of creativity: conceptual creativity, the creativity of business.

In addition, like divergent semantics, innovation is surrounded by a number of wildly popular myths, including these: innovation is about creating things that do not exist; you are either a right-brained or a left-brained thinker; first movers have a sustainable advantage; and failure is required. These myths, all red herrings promulgated as half-truths in the blogosphere, compound our misunderstanding of innovation. Having spent my career researching, teaching, and advising organizations around the globe on innovation, I believe that these myths hinder our capacity to solve problems. I seek to debunk these myths throughout the book, but for now, a few thoughts. First, there is no such thing as a new idea. There are only those that have not been combined in the right way and those for which the time was not appropriate. Heed the advice of Carlos Pellicer, one of the early Mexican modernist poets, who once observed, "I am time between two eternities. Before me, eternity and after me, eternity. Fire; a solitary shadow amid immense clarities." If you want to win at the business of innovation, study the past. It's all been done before—often in a different form or in a different place. Those who succeed at innovation often do so by reinterpreting the past and reconfiguring the present in order to create the future.

A second myth worth debunking is the belief that people are either right-brained (creative) or left-brained (logical). Although the idea would make for good science fiction, there is no such thing as a half-brained person. Diagnosing people as either right-brained or left-brained is as helpful to innovation as suggesting that a zebra has either black stripes or white stripes. As we'll explore later, your entire brain is involved in the creative process.

Third, and contrary to popular opinion, in many categories first movers do not maintain sustainable advantage. With the exception of some highly regulated industries such as pharmaceuticals or defense contracts where manufacturers design to specification, it is not unusual for an organization to follow a first mover and ultimately create greater value and sustain success over a longer period of time. In today's hypercompetitive, open-sourced world, if you want to create sustainable value, develop the capacity to *find* the first movers, and either do what they do better or figure out some way to work with them. The idea of connecting with ideas (versus inventing them) is not only a recent trend in innovation circles; it was at the heart of the unrivaled success of the world's most recognized inventor, Thomas Edison. Edison was more of a broker than an inventor. His talent was in attracting the best and the brightest inventors to his laboratory, knowing how to manage them in a collaborative effort, and promoting their work vigorously under the Edison name. Edison understood the value of a brand long before it became a buzzword.

Finally, the most pervasive myth in the field of innovation is that failure is required. Failure is *not* required. By learning to think appropriately, versus differently, you can mitigate failure from the creative process. Sure, there will always be those who fail; however, wouldn't you rather learn on someone else's dime than spend your own repeating their mistakes?

*The Riddle* seeks to dispel these myths; however, the ultimate goal of this book is to illustrate techniques for fostering conceptual creativity—to help you think deliberately, not just differently. This is based on my belief that creativity can be taught, and it can be learned. I believe that learning to think creatively is no different from learning to do math. There are rules, there is logic, there are right answers, and there are wrong answers. The only difference between creativity and mathematics is that applied creativity as a discipline has not had the deliberate focus given to mathematics.

The content of this book represents informed opinions, observations, and an occasional timeless truth that I have encountered

in my work as an educator and adviser to individuals and organizations of all shapes and sizes on creativity, innovation, and growth. It is my intention with this book—and I invite you to join me—to help develop the field of applied creativity (innovation) not as a failure-induced happy accident but rather as a discipline. I believe the best place to start this conversation is not by thinking differently but by thinking deliberately about the common yet elusive precursors to creative insight.

Like most other riddles, the answer can often be found in the question. Clues exist. So too is the case of the creativity riddle. The answer to the creativity riddle—where ideas come from—can be found by studying the outcomes of inspiration (ideas) and the individuals responsible for creating them. If you look closely at ideas and the experiences of their creators just prior to the conception of these ideas, the ideas themselves offer clues as to their origins. In my research, I have identified five distinct clues—precursors to creative insight—that are often present at the conception of an idea. I have designed and written this book to explore each of these precursors in consecutive chapters—curiosity, constraints, conventions, connections, and codes—in order to help you learn to conjure up aha moments at will.

The ideas and concepts I propose here are by no means definitive. I do not profess to have discovered the Holy Grail that governs epiphany and would never attempt to guarantee that everything in this book will work in a particular case. However, what I can promise is this: if you approach the principles and suggestions in this book with an open mind and in the spirit of intellectual curiosity, you will be rewarded.



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# 1

## THE INNOVATION INTENT

The word *innovator* conjures up a plethora of personalities, among them the usual suspects: Leonardo da Vinci, Albert Einstein, Richard Branson. We have a tendency to lump all innovators into a single category: creative geniuses. However in order to understand where ideas come from, it is first important to distinguish the different forms of creative expression and the different types of innovators—artistic creativity (for example, Pablo Picasso), scientific creativity (for example, Marie Curie), and conceptual creativity (for example, James Dyson, the inventor of the Dyson vacuum cleaner, the cleaner that “doesn’t lose suction”)—since these three forms require different skills and have very different goals. By understanding these differences, you can avoid the predictable fender benders often associated with innovation: botched business ventures, failed product launches, and disastrous investment decisions. In order to put the innovation intent into context, I will share a personal experience with you that led to my own eureka moment about the field in which I work: innovation. If you have ever attended a creativity seminar, this experience may sound familiar.

Karaoke is a dodgy affair and ought to be heavily regulated. Care and use requirements should read as follows: *Karaoke is to be used only while intoxicated or while in the presence of a heavily sedated audience. Furthermore, karaoke is designed for entertainment purposes only and should not be used for practical applications. Break the rules, and face stiff fines.* There I was, minding my own business, when I was suddenly launched into the midst of a dozen complete strangers singing Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive.” If you could have seen us: howling like caged animals with heads thrown back in ecstasy and fists pumping wildly. Survival was certainly on my mind, but

so too was spontaneous combustion. You might conclude that I was involved in some sort of premarital ritual, but this was not the case. Quite the contrary, I was attending a creativity seminar: a day-long event designed to help participants “think differently.” The room had a romper room feel to it: games, toys, beanbags. You get the picture. At one point, we even paused for an ice cream break. The session facilitator had arranged for the Good Humor man to swing by in his ice cream truck just in time to inspire our palates. I had a Bomb Pop, the original cherry-, lime-, and blue-raspberry-flavored frozen treat.

And then it happened. Aha! I was indeed beginning to think differently. While licking the remains of my cherry-, lime-, and blue-raspberry-stained fingers, I suddenly realized the extent to which creativity and innovation are profoundly misunderstood.

In an attempt to reduce inhibitions, a hallmark of creativity, many purveyors of innovation employ games such as these to promote new ways of thinking. Their belief is that divergent thinking (thinking outside the box) will increase as inhibitions retreat. This is absolutely true; however, where they run into trouble is how they go about promoting creativity. Promoting *artistic* creativity (the creation of unique objects) by virtue of song and dance may be temporarily entertaining, but it is not necessarily the most effective method for encouraging *conceptual* creativity (the art of problem solving). It does include an element of fun and when used in moderation can be effective. However, one could argue that public displays of artistic expression may heighten inhibitions for many people, particularly when done in the company of strangers or even coworkers.

Since creativity is a function of both cognition and emotion, the feeling of anxiety that these stunts often produce works to narrow our attention (cognitively) and motivates us (emotionally) to withdraw from creative collaboration (“I’ve got to get out of here!” may be the overwhelming thought). Anxiety and creativity are strange bedfellows. Robert Sternberg, a leading researcher in intelligence and creativity, has found that “a creative person

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