

## The Area 51 of Your Mind:

a conversation about discovering your creativity.

by

greg stene, ph.d.  
10706 capitol hwy. #46  
portland, OR 97219

[greg@mindthwack.com](mailto:greg@mindthwack.com)

"The most important failure was one of imagination."<sup>1</sup>

from the July 22, 2004 release of *The 9/11 Commission Report*, on the failure to think creatively about potential terrorist actions. A failure by the government, the intelligence community and others before the September 11, 2001 killings at the World Trade Center by al Qaeda operatives.

"I am always doing that which I can not do, in order that I may learn how to do it."

Pablo Picasso (<http://www.refdesk.com/apr00td.html>)

"Self-expression without craft is for toddlers."

*The Ear of the Beholder*, by Rosanne Cash, The New York Times, May 22, 2008 (<http://measureformeasure.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/05/22/the-ear-of-the-beholder/>)

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<sup>1</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report. Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Executive Summary." at <http://i.a.cnn.net/cnn/US/resources/9.11.report/911ReportExec.pdf>. Quote at p. 9

***unseen scary things,  
and guards who haven't killed anyone in months.  
and maybe it's bugging them.***

You know how it is at Area 51, the place we hold the spacecraft that crashed at Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947. The place in the Nevada desert where they really have discovered the secrets of interplanetary flight by taking apart other ships that have landed. Crashed or otherwise. Our scientists have backwards-engineered them so we can build them from scratch. At least, all of that's what some people figure.

Common knowledge tells us that there are heavily-armed guards in SUVs patrolling the unseen border of this place in the middle of the stinking desert with its harsh desert sand and rock surrounding the installation. Some of those SUVs, you never see. Some, you do.

Especially when you play with where you think the fence should be. Just kind of kick at the ground a couple times there. Just to be able to say you did it when you're back home drinking with the guys. And then freak-city and some SUV actually rises out of the ground somehow right in front of you (how the hell did that *get there!*) and disgorges these hulking creatures in black uniforms, sunglasses, and big guns moving incredibly fast, and so totally beyond your ability to deal with them, you pray that

somewhere in their brainpans there's a small slot for the word "mercy," associated with your face along for the ride.

It was so quick. You figure the snipers out there in that desert space have had their crosshairs trained on your forehead since you stepped up to that imaginary border, and they've been continuously reporting on your actions. (Most gunners are trained to go for the body mass of the chest, something you can't miss ... well-trained snipers are good enough to go for that small 3-pound mass of brain you carry around in your skull.)

And Amber, your main squeeze next to you on this crazy-trip, decides to stand tall and reach out with both fists and flip off the guys from the SUV and she goes laughing hysterically at them, hands and fingers still extended as they surround her.

Yeah.

That's how you imagine it is at Area 51. Someone else sets the rules ... says that you might get close to the perimeter. But you're not getting inside. No chance.

Kind of like what they've done to our heads over the years. All those teachers, our friends, other people too many to remember keeping us from that that huge curiosity-thing in our heads ... the hairy ideas of our imagination slammed up and stopped dead before we even know these exciting new ideas are even there ... and replaced by our doing what's expected and backing away from the scary perimeter in our minds.

Okay, we'll just behave ourselves here now. We'll do normal. Think normal.

They've put a perimeter up in your imagination, trapped your own creativity into an Area 51 up there in your head. You know where it is, but you can't get inside. School rules. Teacher's grading. Parents worried about you going too far growing up. Bosses telling you to sit back, be quiet and just do the damned job. Follow the rules.

And all the while, your own Area 51 is calling.

But you can't go. Because it's a place our society has forbidden most of us from walking. Telling you that your imagination's got to be kept under control, that curiosity really has no place in this world since we've already figured everything out, pretty much. And that creativity's just a waste of time because so many other people out there are already thinking of so many things that you'll never think of anything new.

Hey, Dude. Your life's already set up for you. Just follow the rules.

Besides. What's there to be creative about, anyway?

"Crap," goes your soured head. "Okay. Maybe you're right. I can't think of anything to be creative about, anyway." And that gets a little bit scary. No, a lot scary.

But there's nothing to be done for it, so we tuck our creativity, curiosity, and imagination away into our own Area 51, and we straighten up and begin to play with that brand new incredible 55-inch wide-screen HDTV with ... distraction ... and all those things that society's got that keep us from entering the Area 51 of our minds seem to have done their job very well with some great distractions. Like that HDTV.

### ***Area 51 ... the metaphor***

**The reality of Area 51:** Here's the thing about Area 51. It's supposed to be a semi-secret U.S. military reservation known as the location for the testing of highly secret U.S. aircraft, like the two Stealth models which came out more than a decade ago. Maybe. There are conflicting reports on the Net as to whether the secret testing even happened or continues today. That the security is intense and that there are signs indicating the military has the right to use lethal force to keep people out is part of the cultural folklore of the place.

**The perceived reality of Area 51:** Area 51 is the place known by a lot of people, from all-out, full-time, get-a-storefront-and-paste-posters-about-the-aliens-in-all-the-windows believers in extraterrestrial life, to those moderately interested in the idea of aliens not as land or a military installation, but as an idea. A really interesting idea. Area 51 has such mystique, such draw, and such cultural cachet as the place of aliens, most anyone would be happy to get inside and take a walk around.

Area 51 is in your mind, as much as in the middle of some godawful desert.

**The metaphor of Area 51 in your mind:** Area 51 in your mind is the place of The Three ... creativity, curiosity, imagination. All of us have an Area 51 in our minds. And nearly all of us have those snipers waiting and those cutting lines of mental barbed wire strung around these talents in our heads to keep us away from them (Area 51 apparently does not have fences, but the visual is a great one, so we'll use it). The snipers take occasional shots ... to become creative seems so uncertain and undefined ... and you might not get a creative idea and you'll fail ... or your idea might be ridiculed, and so will you ... other people don't think like that. So don't even bother trying.

In the face of all that, it's nearly the act of a god to be imaginative these days. And creativity certainly can kill relationships, job positions and other things best left alone. Curiosity and asking questions rather than just accepting things mark you as Area 51-level *different*.

And that can make most of us give up on letting our curiosity lead us to new and better ideas. So if we're on a walk by the river and we see the bodies of creativity, imagination, and curiosity floating by on that swampy afternoon, we ain't going to go poking inquisitive sticks into them as they float in the shallow water.

We're just going to get the hell out of there. It's a lot safer than being different.

And even if it looks good, if it looks safe ... if we see creativity, imagination, and curiosity alive and having a quiet lunch on a sidewalk café downtown and they call us over, we're hailing a cab instead. There's no percentage in stirring things up.

***but some people can't shake their sense of wonder at Area 51.***

The mind's Area 51 is not a place with maps leading to it. It is not a place with landmarks, with billboards telling you that you're nearing something special. It is not a place you can go to with your friends and drink beer afterwards and laugh and wonder how many sniper's barrels were trained on your head.

You have to go to the mind's Area 51 alone. No natural road map. No guarantee of finding your way home. In fact, when you reach the Area 51 of your mind, you will be changed forever, and there really is no going home to where and who you were when you set out on your journey. You will be different. They are right about that. The Area 51 of you mind will make you different.

And maybe this is why there is such a reluctance to visit the mind's Area 51. Maybe we instinctively understand that to open the wire-and-wood gates on that desert road that leads to creativity, imagination, and curiosity ... maybe we know that we'll be changed in unknowable ways.

It is much safer to open the garage door in the morning and just drive on down the road to work, and do the same thing there as we did yesterday.

But for some people, taking the unknown journey is what life is about. Because that's where you find the aliens, where you find your dreams, where you stand fast against those who would keep you from knowledge and growth that is rightfully yours.

And though there are no road maps, a guide is appreciated.

One is available. You hold it in your hands.

*early intermission.*

This book has a plan. It might wander a bit now and then, but that's the way creativity works. If you know where you're going and how to get there, you're not on a creative path.

In general, though, we'll do these things ... we'll talk about creativity and what it means to us as people to become creative. How that does make us different. Along the way, we'll look at a number of creative-thinking techniques and some exercises to give you experience in that way of thinking.

And in possibly the most important part of the book, we'll look at something this book calls the three levels of creativity. We're all generally pretty familiar with the first two levels ... the ones that go from making you curious about how your butt looks and you creatively figure that copying machine's got some work ahead of it, to the brilliance we see in some movies, books, music. And the really creative thinking that goes into a lot of inventions and toys and the like.

But there's a third level, the one that this book calls Zen Creativity, and it's something very different. And there's a reason it comes toward the end of the book. Because you really have to understand the creative thinking that goes behind dropping

your pants in front of the copier at work, and the more refined creativity behind the interior design of that BMW you want to buy ... once you comprehend where that kind of thinking comes from, you'll be able to understand this idea of Zen Creativity.

You'll have to work hard to get to it. But in understanding the conventional forms of creativity, you'll be well-placed mentally to begin working your way into that 3<sup>rd</sup> level. Think of this work and preparation as similar to the devotion through the days and nights it takes to become a master at the concepts and techniques of art. The 3<sup>rd</sup> level is the perfect balls-out tear into a race course where you are one with the car and the pavement, and you don't get to racer's level of being the drive itself by just driving to work. It is, of course, the Van Goghs, the Warhols, the Newtons, the Einsteins, the Steven Jobs of Apple. This Zen Creativity landscape is walked by only a few. It is not just given to you. It can only be earned. But it can be found.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> level of creativity is a quantum leap past the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> levels into a completely other way of thinking that taps directly into the subconscious, and lets your mind engage in the process called "incubation," where we see inspiration most often occurring. And the processing, which ordinarily takes days, is sped up so fast we can't even see it happening. The incubation process can develop deep, and truly creative ideas. We help you make it happen quickly.

To make that jump to the 3<sup>rd</sup> level is like standing in front of some dark hanger at the end of an Area 51 runway and taking those first steps into the shadows inside, not knowing if you're ever coming back out into the sunlight.

And while you will certainly emerge, the sun's light will fall on a different person.

[a few chapters later]

***brainstorming.  
thinking at lightning speed.***

Everything you're going to read about a group of people getting together and brainstorming can be done by a single person who has the freedom of the mind to rummage about in the scary places up there. In fact, research has shown that even though we value the team aspect of brainstorming, it's generally less efficient in generating the number (and possibly the quality) of ideas that the same people would develop if they sat at their own desk for the same period and wrote down ideas as they came to them.<sup>2</sup>

But in working by yourself, you'll need to depend on yourself, open yourself to ideas you don't like, be enthusiastic about challenging your own favorite ideas, and have strange thoughts about why you're even giving the alternative view equal consideration. You'll either have fun or go schizophrenic. Both can be amusing, though schizophrenia has gotten a bit of a bad rap and the side-effects of the remedial drugs are said to be quite awful.

So, though this chapter is directed at groups, it's you, the individual who will find the key to a lot of creative thinking on your own happening in this chapter.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A number of resources from Theresa Amabile's, *Creativity in Context*, 1996, p. 245, to several references in the infamous Wikipedia's entry on brainstorming support this. Amabile suggests more ideas may be generated by individuals, but they may not be "higher-quality" ideas.

<sup>3</sup> An aside ... all this base information on the process of being creative through brainstorming was developed by advertising agency BBDO founder, Alex Osborn in the early 1940s, more than 60 years ago.

You'll find some differences between people about what the particular rules surrounding brainstorming are, but they do seem to boil down to a few accepted points in common. The minimum number of people needed for a brainstorming session has been changing over time. Classically, you look for about 10-12 or so. But only one or two of you will do just fine. So forget the idea of needing a critical mass of any sort.

Here's how it's supposed to work, at its philosophical best ... the power of a number of people acting in concert spurs the creative juices of each other person, so that the contributions of a single person are greater than he or she would have come up with independently (but we've already seen that that is often not the case; however very good groups can accomplish this synergy<sup>4</sup>). The group also offers a variety of perspectives from which to come at the problem, something a single person is not supposed to have at his or her disposal (this seems to often be quite true). And the group of people is supposed to have the ability to examine a proposed creative solution and build on it, and spur on new creative thinking when development begins to slow (also apparently true). There's more, but those points tend to be irrelevant and small.

*Here are a couple issues we need to discuss*

*before we get into the whole brainstorming-thing:*

**Issue 1: Define the problem, and the goals. Clearly.**

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If you like being ironic, you might enjoy thinking of him in a room by himself and without benefit of a group of other people, sitting in an empty room ... thinking up ways of how to get groups of people to think creatively by brainstorming with about 12 other people.

<sup>4</sup> Someone once said that if you hear someone mention the word "synergy" in any kind of setting, get the hell out of there. Great thought. The buzzword synergy has been overused and inappropriately used by mindless speakers and writers for a while now. However, the idea of synergy is a good one ... the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Consider the idea of having all the disassembled parts of a car in a garage. That's cool, but when you put them all together, it actually becomes something different ... something that can transport you from one point to another, something which the group of all the parts alone cannot do. Good working groups of people can indeed, create a synergy of thought. Good groups.

Don't want to sound preachy here, but you can't afford to forget this reality about brainstorming or life in general ... if you start off at the wrong place, no matter how beautiful your logic is as you progress, or no matter how marvelous your creative inspiration as you develop concepts, you will end up at another wrong place.

So, you've absolutely got to find the right questions to ask before you begin your journey ... you absolutely must know what the real (not the assumed) problem is, and you must begin there.

Too many groups begin a brainstorming session without clearly defining the problem and the goals of the group. They hear a situation presented, want to solve it in record time because solving problems is the job they've historically been given, and they jump in thinking they've got all they need. It's the way we are in this Western culture.

The energy's to be admired. The lack of clear understanding is to be feared.

Consider a smaller state university that suddenly has 900 generally equally qualified applicants for only 600 freshmen slots. Why so many new applicants? Well, the economy's gone downhill recently and a lot of people figure that if they can't get a job, they may as well get better positioned by education for when the economy turns around. Applications have jumped dramatically as a result.

What's the problem? One problem is that the university has no clearly defined method of allocating entry slots for equally qualified freshmen. It never occurred to them that this would happen. The economy's not sucked this badly since the 1930s, and no one really expected or planned for those extreme, strange times again. That problem of higher-than-expected applicant levels gives rise to the goal to solve that problem. In this case, the apparent goal would be stated as ... how do we fairly choose

the 600 students to admit? But should it be the goal? Is there another way of looking at the problem here? One that would develop new goals?

First, though ... way too often, people confuse problems and goals.

Simply put, a problem is what's bothering you. A problem's the confusion, the mess, the horrorshow of life or administering to what you're dealing with. Or to bring it to a personal level ... my teeth have suddenly become an ugly shade of yellow overnight (TV ads have taught me that this is unacceptable). My kid keeps getting into trouble. My parents don't understand me. My wife doesn't understand me. My dog and my husband misunderstand me. These are problems.

Oh. Here's a real problem, my dog understands me.

Those are problems. Those are the things that are bugging you.

Don't let this problem statement get complex or it'll get away from you.

But ... there are always a lot of other underlying problems that give rise to the apparent primary problems we have, and they can in fact be the most important issues we have to deal with. They can be The Actual Problem.

One of those problems is life and psychology, and our expectations of things. If we expect things to go to hell because that's the way they've gone in the past, we might actually prefer that that pattern of failure continue as opposed to dealing with the real issues that will make things better. We sabotage our own problem-defining and solutions by working on the things that are not The Actual Problem. I believe this occurs more often than we suspect.

We hide from discovering and solving the real issues because we've grown accustomed to things falling apart, and seeing them get better would just totally screw up our world view and make things uncomfortable. Once they started

going well, we'd become responsible for seeing that they continue to go well.

And that sets us up for a lot of work and heartache.

Best settle into the seat on that bus we're used to and offer up our ticket to Hell to the bus driver. At least we know where we're going.

Because of our drive to keep things the way they are and familiar, we often can't let ourselves see the real problems in life. (A form of this desire to keep things as they are is called psychological homeostasis. It's one of the central driving motivations of all beings ... seeking to keep things as they are, no matter how ugly; think heroin addiction or an abusive marriage. You could also toss in cognitive dissonance here, the conflict of two conditions ... the knowledge that this heroin addiction is killing me, but the pain of kicking is horrible, so the addiction is good. You get it. The addiction, though bad, is rationalized as acceptable because the alternative seems worse.)

We often keep letting ourselves get distracted by the effects of the problem, rather than deal with The Actual Problem's own damned self. We often let ourselves get distracted by symptoms, not the problem, because symptoms are easier to deal with. But getting distracted by the symptoms of the problem, rather than The Actual Problems, is guaranteed keep things failing in general.

Yeah. Failure's painful. But it's safe, baby. It's what we know and can cope with. So, unconsciously, we choose to fail.

For example, "My kid keeps getting into trouble" might be the result of the fact that the husband and wife argue with each other to the point of exhaustion every night and the kid's running from all that. The husband might ask himself in private brainstorming ... how do I keep my kid from getting into trouble?

But Dude, that ain't going to work. That's not the real problem. The father's let the problem of the kid screwing up obscure the reasons *why* the kid's screwing up in the first place.

Here's the real question he should be asking ... why's my kid screwing up? That gets to the real problem. Why does this condition exist? Now there's a responsible Actual Problem question.

In other words, the problem of the kid screwing up is not The Actual Problem. That's just a symptom of the real problem. No inspired or deep thinking here. This is nothing more than Psych 101, but this paragraph is just a friendly reminder that the real problem with the kid might lie in dear old dad's drinking a six-pack at night and the kid's decided he can't live in that toxic atmosphere, and no matter how much dad tries to address the goal of keeping his kid out of trouble, he's going to fail because he hasn't found the real problem to address. The problem is dad himself.

Finding the fault to lie with the kid, is easier than finding that the fault lies with our own selves.

**And here's a weird thing that makes sense:** The problem statement and the goal statement are just mirror images of each other. Remember the university's apparent problem? We don't have a way to fairly select 600 students from an applicant pool of 900.

What's their goal statement? Just a reverse of the problem statement – I need a method to fairly select 600 students. The problem and goal statements are so inter-related, all you generally have to do is reverse the problem to rephrase it to what you want as an outcome, to get a goal statement.

So, because it gives direct rise to your goal, a correct problem statement becomes even more critical. Here's a fairly direct problem/goal statement:

Problem ... I don't earn enough to buy a new car.

Goal ... I need to earn more money to buy a new car.

Here's one that's a bit more complicated:

Problem ... We're losing money in this phase of our business.

Goal ... We need to make this phase of our business profitable.

[You've likely already considered the idea that losing money in one phase of this business is generally not the result of a single problem, and the money-loss may be caused by a factor outside that phase. So seeking out The Actual Problem becomes far more important and wide-ranging. For example, discovering that a low-quality part of the charcoal BBQ grill you produce breaks 20 percent of the time may not be so much the choice of materials, as it is the mindset of the purchasing department which is willing to choose a lower grade material in the first place. The Actual Problem, in this case is the set of assumptions the purchasing department operates under. This creates a wholly different goal than the one you'd develop for the "we're losing money" problem that you started with.]

For meaningful brainstorming sessions, you need to spend time as a group examining the problem as it's been presented to you. Is the problem statement a good and true problem statement, or is it a confused mess of issues, such as the kid-behavior thing, or the "losing money" example above? Is there a hidden goal statement already provided to you by the people who charge you with the problem that you're supposed to address (it may be a righteous hidden goal, or a mistaken one and driven by any

number of political, personal, or simply mistaken reasons), or are you being asked to develop a reasonable goal from the right problem statement?

Going back to the issue of 900 applications and only 600 freshman slots. Rather than just accept an apparently reasonable goal statement by the administration that asks, "How do we fairly select 600 freshmen" (and believe me, this is really quite reasonable on its surface presentation), your group may want to examine this to see if there are a variety of acceptable alternative goals to consider.

Problem: We have 900 applicants for 600 slots. Alternative goal statement ... what if you considered accepting all 900 qualified applicants? That's completely outside the original problem statement. But consider how that changes the equation. This simple reconsideration of the problem is something you develop when you brainstorm the problem itself. You will never consider it if you blindly accept a problem/goal statement from an administration or business drone.

Suddenly, it becomes clear that the assumption that simply limiting enrollment to 600 solves the problem could be very wrongheaded.

Just one alternative shows where a greater opportunity may lie in rejecting the obvious problem/goal of accepting only 600 applicants ... instead, what if you considered taking in all 900 ... could you add staff and classrooms (night classes at the local high schools), paid by temporary tuition increases, all on a temporary basis, and allow all 900 potential students to enroll and use that enrollment and a load of public relations effort to show state lawmakers that your university's allocation of education dollars from the state legislature must be increased?

You bet. Funding complexities aside (yes, they are huge), you have solved this problem on a practical, and political level. Sure, there are problems in this new goal

statement of accepting 900 students, rather than 600, but it offers opportunity for growth, rather than stunting growth through mindless assumptions that you're often fed by administrators, project managers, MarComm types and the like.

**Issue 2: Find and destroy all assumptions:**

One of the biggest killers of the creative mind is the assumption.

The above example of the problem statement for the university shows how an assumption of having to live within a limit of 600 new freshmen kills off any potential for redefining the situation, and developing new ideas that may serve everyone better. In fact, increased enrollment could end up providing grounds for a permanent new-money allocation and allow the university a new planned program of growth to meet the needs of the community. This means more legislative power for the local university, something every state university loves. But assuming that the problem actually was limited to fairly selecting only 600 would have killed off this potential.

It's the same thing with our creative projects. Assumptions will kill creative potential.

Here's an example. Advertising agencies lose clients on a regular basis. It's not necessarily a reflection of bad work or bad relations, but time passes and people on both sides of the invoice look for new ideas and relationships of this kind. So agencies are always looking for new clients even if all they want to do is stay the same size.

Imagine there's this very small ad agency headed up by Cody Barstow and Summer Dayse. And they're looking to develop new business. One of the local events, the City Home and Garden Show, is sponsored in part by the local homebuilding community. So Cody gets the idea in his head to impress these homebuilder types at the show with a piece of creative work he and Summer put together specially for the

show. Impress the builders. Get the builders to call Cody and Summer to do advertising for them to sell their homes.

Cody, the copywriter, has this idea of using a floor plan. Everyone recognizes a floor plan, and it carries all sorts of symbolic and righteously stereotypical information. But you've got to do something different with it, he knows, because if there ever was a boring cliché in home building, it's the floor plan. And even though people generally appreciate the expected presentation of a floor plan ... something unexpectedly different along these lines is going to make an impact.

Maybe, Cody thinks, we could talk about the different rooms with captions, like how, "J. Williams III, in a room shaped like this, came up with the conceptual counterpoint to Robert Mapplethorp's black-and-white nude photographic images by shooting full-color photos of people clothed in parkas and babushkas worn by old Soviet women, and MC Hammer-style bigpants." Do that kind of bad-mind thinking for a whole series of rooms on a single floor plan. The agency'd get some attention. But neither Cody, nor Summer, the art director, were thinking this was enough. And on second glance, the idea and its joke seemed too obscure even for Cody.

So Cody spends the better part of the rest of the day trying to figure out how to make this floor-plan thing work visually. He comes up dry. Summer leans over Cody as he's lying there on the couch in the break room whimpering because his mind's betrayed him and she says,

"Why don't we create the floor plan as a real painting with real thick paint? Different colors for each of the different rooms. We forget the line drawings of a floor plan, we use the clash between colors to represent walls, we let doorways explode colors into rooms. We light the finished painting hard from the side so the tall layers

and edges of the heavy paint I've built up cast a shadow across the rooms, and we shoot the thing. Print it up tonight. Incredible art ... and it shows a creative approach to the traditional presentation."

"Uh, but we've got to use a standard floor plan, Summer."

"Why?" she says.

There you are. She'd broken hard and fast through that assumption of using a standard floor plan that he'd carried into the project. Cody marries Summer six months later, he listens to her a lot, and their agency soars.

**And so we come back to brainstorming:** Get the problem stated properly. Then get your goal, the outcome of solving the problem, figured out and stated cleanly. And question every assumption you make, whether you're in a city council working session on the homeless, or sitting at your blank computer screen trying to come up with some new ideas for your novel.

And then get a bunch of friends together and brainstorm. Well, maybe not. First of all, where are you going to find a bunch of friends to do brainstorming, and then assuming you did ... what are you going to do with the problem everyone has with the more dim people who tend to come to these kind of sessions?

**Bad actors who don't bring a brain to brainstorming:** Okay. It's time to deal with this. This book is *not* a 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s touchy-feelie affirmation of everyone's worth, and this book will not ever endorse the idea that everyone has at least *something* of value to offer in a particular situation. A lot of people have absolutely nothing to contribute. Other than complaining, screaming, or whining, or trying to take over the group, and that really doesn't help all that much. This is not very politically correct in attitude, but essentially correct in reality.

You should not ask these people to join your brainstorming group.<sup>5</sup>

**The history of brainstorming and bad brains:** To understand why brainstorming sessions with a bunch of people might happen to include the less capable, it'll help to examine the history of brainstorming itself. Remember that Alex Osborn, one of the founders of the ad firm BBDO, was supposed to have developed the idea of brainstorming back in the 1940s, really made it happen in the 50s, through today.

I think those date's are wrong. I'm sure that there was a defining night back in that first human Tribe From Which All Current Humans Evolved about 150,000 years or so ago (I promised we'd return occasionally to pre-history in this book), when they were all hanging together, quite hungry for a good steak, and trying to figure out how to take down a Hairy Mastodon. Big creature. Elephant-like. Killer tusks. Literally killer. Tasty.

And these proto-metrosexual-guys who will become concerned with the shape and colors of their toenails when the 2000s roll along, are only coping with their new minds at a low level compared to us so that dressing in animal skins and maybe having a couple really sharp rocks and a heavy wooden club between them is pretty cool stuff. But a major handicap when up against a mastodon.

The big guy who's leading the hunting brainstorming session, Malek, puts aside memories of the old days of his youth when he ran long-yards for the touchdown, carrying the head of his Neanderthal opponent that he'd just cut off during the timeout. Malek suggests to the crowd that they could all have a go at the Mastodon head-on in

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<sup>5</sup> Traditional think is that we can rehabilitate these people through working with them in the team environment. It appears that's wrong-headed, and destructive to the team's efforts. NPR, summarizing an interview with Will Felps, a Rotterdam School of Management professor: "A bad apple, at least at work, can spoil the whole barrel." Felps added an actor to small groups that were given tasks. The actor played out the role of either jerk, slacker or depressive, "and within 45 minutes, the rest of the group started

the morning and beat it senseless with their fists. By God, he'd beaten at least two Neanderthal tribes in a football game on their way to extinction that way.

But Blak, in the back of the night crowd suggests that select marksmen stand off and toss spears at the hairy thing from a distance and wait for it to bleed to death before they approach it. Everyone loves this idea, and then asks ... what's a spear?

Blak, in response, has no idea. But he offers a creative thought. Okay, I have no idea of what a spear is, but we've got rocks. What if we don't confront the Big Thing directly (they called it the Big Thing, their schools being nonexistent they did not know that it should be called a Hairy Mastodon), like Malek wants us to do, but rather confuse the big beast by sending people from all kinds of different directions? And what if we throw our rocks at the head instead of the body when we do that? Maybe we bring it down quicker.

As a demonstration, Blak unexpectedly slams a rock into the head of the person next to him and the person collapses unconscious. The crowd *oooohs* in understanding.

Malek snorts at Blak, literally, signifying that not only does his idea suck, but his entire clan is also dogmeat for their outright lack of crazy-courage, and Malek begins to insist that his idea is the only one that will work and that closes off the discussion.

**Now, what have we learned here:** First, we have learned that both Malek and Blak survived the attack on the Hairy Mastodon to spawn descendants who walk among us today. Blak's descendants are the ones who call for meaningful consideration of issues ... some've become politicians, but most are good friends and good people to work with who spend time thinking things through, and considerate of others' ideas.

In contrast, Malek's descendants are the ones who sit slack-jawed in the middle of group sessions, occasionally offering up a meatball of wisdom that is so completely off-track and takes everyone by so much surprise that they're unable to marshal the force necessary to just smack the sorry bastard across the side of the head.

So, the lesson to take from this is that if you call a random, anyone-can-attend brainstorming session, you're likely to have a Malek or two attending. This Malek-creature can be quite harmful, as we noted earlier. They can be quite noisy and try to take over the meeting.<sup>6</sup> And when seriously placed in the context of a goal-directed group of people, this beast becomes a major irritant that actually affects the overall performance of the group and yet, according to our touchie-feelie way of dealing with brainstorming, everyone is supposed to value his wrong-headed input.

I say you kick the sombitch out. No redemption. No opportunity to come back to the fold. They fail, and they have to deal with that.

Here's why ... not everyone is equipped to deal with the needs of a creative session. Not everyone is able to understand the process of goal-setting to solve a problem, while at the same time think creatively. Not everyone is able to remember to keep his knuckles off the floor.

And the purpose of our work is to find, identify, and encourage the smart thinkers in our organization. You might lose a few people ... and that's tough. But you end up with a group of people who know how to think creatively. Smartly. Together and independently.

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<sup>6</sup> A Time magazine, March 2, 2009 article noted research indicating that people who spoke the most at meetings were rated more highly in "general intelligence" and as "dependable and self-disciplined," and the ones who spoke less were rated "conventional and uncreative." An extension to this study found that those who just spoke up more often were rated as more competent, even if they weren't. At <http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1878358,00.html>, visited 7/4/2010.

It is manifestly unfair to everyone, your participants and Malek-types alike, to keep a Malek in a brainstorming group, no matter the group-hugging needs and public pronouncements of any number of counselors, self-image pushers, and the rest. Keeping the Malek is harmful to the rest of the group, and the value added by having them there in hopes they will contribute is negligible.<sup>7</sup>

***So, what are the rules in a good brainstorming session:***

- **State the problem clearly** and agree to the goal of the session. If there is ambiguity about what it is you're trying to accomplish, you'll end up with ambiguous results. The best results always seem to have their start in a clear statement of the problem and goal, after critical examination of the presented problem/goal.
- **There will be no judgment of anyone's input or ideas** until the session ends. A sure way to kill off continued contribution of possible solutions or general ideas is to let some yahoo in the group say something like, "Well, that idea sucks, Michael," or "How's that going to work, Jessica?" These comments not only denigrate the idea, but call into question the person who makes them. There's no room for this kind of crap. This is where everyone must take on the responsibility of being a leader and stop these kinds of comments. You find your true leaders when they arise in these times, not when they are assigned the role. Recognize them. Reward them. Especially when they go after the Maleks.
- **The idea is to encourage as many ideas as possible**, and **not** be concerned with quality. One of the reasons you don't critique an idea when it's uttered, is that you want to be sure people feel free to continue to contribute, no matter how silly

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<sup>7</sup> This is messy in teaching or working-team environments. How do you deal with the ones who simply don't have a clue? Sometimes, you really can't exclude them. But by defining leadership rights at the outset as being able to control the group's direction and those who speak, the group action may provide a (albeit strong-arm) way to avoid much of the effect of the Malek-type.

their idea may be. **The secret behind the assumed effectiveness of brainstorming is in the idea of “quantity” versus “quality.”** The belief is that somewhere in the quantity of ideas flowing freely, the great creative ones will make themselves known. In fact, it appears that the greater the number of ideas in a session, often, the greater the number of good creative ideas that occur.

- **Build on other people’s ideas, and encourage others to build on yours.** This reprocessing is one of the areas of creative thought that seems to be most neglected by inexperienced brainstormers. Most people, caught up in the heat of a session, seem to believe they’re contributing only if they come up with a completely new idea. So as soon as someone says something, everyone else is frantically rummaging their grey cells trying to come up with a whole new original thought. Here’s a beautiful thing about brainstorming ... it actually values variations on an original idea, or reprocessing, as much as the totally new idea. Why? Because in tweaking an already-presented idea, looking at it in a new way, you might find the working solution. Consider how Summer took the idea of a floor plan and turned it into something marvelously creative and powerful by reprocessing the original idea of a simple pen-and-ink floor plan, as puke-city as it was. Remember though, most groups will need to be constantly reminded that building on other people’s ideas is a valid act and vital to creating ideas that work.
- **Have fun.** (Someone else, who I cannot recall, added this factor to the mix.) The best groups invariably have fun. You can actually see it on their faces in the smiles, hear the laughter, and watch the loose body language. Once I was alerted to this and watched the groups in my classes for it, I was happily surprised to see how right this idea is. If you’re running one of these sessions, this is what you want, even if it

looks like they're not on-task. In contrast, you really want to consider directly intervening in a group that's deadly serious and business-boring if you're running a brainstorming session. They're probably quite constipated mentally.

### **Other issues ...**

- **You need to assign someone to take notes.** That's critical, and they need to take all ideas down, and not censor individual people by not recording their ideas. People in the group will easily see that their ideas are not being recorded. They, and others shut down when that happens. You cannot afford to lose these group members, unless they prove to be Maleks.
- **You need to decide on the leadership you'll use.** Some groups use no leader, preferring to let everyone take on that role according to the situation's need. Some groups, especially the ones dealing with very knowledge-intensive issues, prefer a highly knowledgeable leader so they can act as a technical-issues facilitator. Some groups seek a charismatic leader, often in times when it is important to gain consensus; agreement among all people. Some groups just seek a leader who is used to the leadership role to help them move through the process and make decisions.

Both the task and the qualifications of the people involved will determine whether you elect a leader into the system. Consider the task. Would a leader with expertise in creative thinking help? Or do you need a counselor-type to lead the group in brainstorming itself? Do you need an expert in your field of decision-making? Or do you very simply need a leader, regardless of expertise? Or are you dealing with an issue with little expertise involved, such as considering ways to recycle/re-use old tires, and you want ideas more than expertise?

Also, you may want to shift leadership according to the various tasks your group moves into during the session.

- **Finally, there is the issue of keeping the session going.** A short note on keeping the team enthused. Let's say you assemble a group for brainstorming according to their skills, knowledge, and creative talents. And they go to work. And they eventually get tired or want to quit. They feel they're tapped out.

One way to beat the exhaustion is by encouraging development, or reprocessing of the "brilliant-but-what-do-we-do-with-it?" idea for further development.

Keep tabs on these ideas as you move through the session. Build a short library of the most innovative of them. Bring them up again when the energy of the group has begun to flag overall.

If the idea of "incubation" really has any merit, and it does, you should find that people have been unconsciously processing some of these ideas as the session's continued, and they have more to contribute now that their minds have played with the ideas.

With the proper framing and guidance, this new productive look at an earlier idea should provide your group with new insight into the problem overall, and rededication to the problem.

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**But I'm a loner, single, 14-20 years old, uncertain about society, I dress in black, and they call me Goth when my real name is Garth ...**

Brainstorming still works for you loners. In fact, this is where you can shine.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> With our cultural dependence on group-think and teamwork, individual brainstorming can seem just wrong at the outset, no matter what the research has shown. But if you think about it, the group experience may trigger fears of expressing one's self, uncertainty about other members, and other issues may tend to restrict what we say to others and how we say it, and can keep a lot of very good ideas from flowing into

The classic definition of brainstorming requires a group of people. But anyone who has worked in a creative field like advertising, or tried to develop new ideas for their business, or wondered if there's anything new they can do to educate their 3-year-old ... you've all brainstormed. And this is a good time to re-read that section at the beginning of this chapter about individuals doing better than entire brainstorming teams.

Take a quick review ... look at those principles of brainstorming. There's not a single thing there that cannot be done by the individual alone, indeed, not a single thing that is not done by every one of us every day as we consider alternatives in our lives.

*What we do wrong, however, is that as individuals we tend to go for the easy solution, or we self-censor. We choose the easy first four-squares solution to problems [this refers to a prior exercise not in this .pdf], rather than believe there may be something better if we just think about this thing a bit longer, pushed a bit harder, took a few more chances and thought about it a bit more creatively.*

But the fact is, the easy solutions do get us through life. They tend to work so we go with them. But creative solutions ... well, they get us involved in life, not just through it. A lot of us think that's a better way. And that's the value of the group that you need to bring to your self-work ... the group becomes a person who urges you on to more and deeper consideration of the issues when you're not wanting to push it on your own. You need to build that part of the group into the way you think about your own efforts.

The self-censoring problem tends to go away with a good group that encourages you to contribute to everyone's success. If you think of yourself as being as deserving of your contribution as a group is, you've got a handle on getting past self-censorship

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the session. However, it has to be said that if one develops a great group with respect and appreciation for each other among all members, it might be expected to outperform efforts by groups of individuals.

when you brainstorm on your own. You deserve a good solution to the brainstorming problem. If you self-censor by quitting early, you won't get it.

So, if you're alone ... if you want to create great advertising or movies, if you want to figure out how to get to Thailand and have a summer on the beach, if you want to imagine and shoot landscape photography better than Ansel Adams ... brainstorm. Every tool that groups use to brainstorm is also yours for the taking as an individual.

How hard should you push it? For the big stuff, you should work past the point of exhaustion. When you want to quit ... when you've exhausted all the solutions that come to your easily ... well, that's the point at which you know you've got a lot more work to do.

It's interesting that when we begin doing this kind of work, we often think we've really done it when we get mentally tired. We've worked hard at it, haven't we? We can't come up with more ideas, can we? The thing is, this is only the point at which we've run through the easy solutions, and we haven't really pushed into the new concepts we really need to develop. It's in this exhausted, but new mental space that we find the creative ideas. The earlier stuff tends to be just a rehash of, or variation on things we've thought about at some time in the past.

So, get used to exhausting yourself, then pushing further.

One thing that showed up constantly in the work of my students was the obvious early shut-down on the brainstorming. There are solutions which seem creative or good but are really just surface considerations ... these come up when you've engaged a problem for a short while. But the great solutions, the really insightful and new ideas come after some serious time spent with the problem.

Don't shortchange yourself by not giving yourself enough time devoted to the problem. The short-time solutions, the surface considerations are very obvious to anyone trained to look for creative thinking. And later, looking back on your work, you'll wonder at how you could have let the easy solutions be the ones you chose.

One thing some people find helpful in changing from group- to individual-based brainstorming, is abandoning the need to record every idea. It's critical that you do record all ideas in groups for the reasons noted above. But when you're doing it as an individual, you need to move quickly and you don't have time to be bogged down by writing ideas on note cards or your palm or whatever.

Some people who write about individualized brainstorming are really emphatic about recording all ideas. Others have found instead that creating that record of the thoughts takes up time from coming up with new thoughts. It interrupts the flow of ideas, and the paper trail of cards and scraps of notes they have later is nothing valuable. It all just becomes this stack of useless information that they feel they have to keep around and keep going over, like some non-rewarding obsession.

Try individual brainstorming without recording the ideas. Let your mind move freely ... freely associating one thought to the next to the next without concern for recording the ideas ... and you'll find that with practice, you weave a pattern of ideas that makes sense, is highly creative, and one in which the good ideas and the ones worth reconsidering stand out.

When you're done, write the major ideas down. Don't delay. Do it immediately after you're done with the session, otherwise, the ideas will get lost quickly. Just the topic points, don't do detail ... that will get you bogged down and you may forget some

ideas you'd like to keep. Also, if you just depend on remembering them later, you might not give your mind room to wander with them and play freely with their development over the next few hours or days ... your head will be too occupied with keeping the ideas in place to feel comfortable to play with them.

You could always video-record yourself using your WebCam, or something similar. It's an easy way of recording the ideas with minimal intrusion or removal from the act of brainstorming.

**Stupid ideas ... first, accept that they will happen:** When you begin to settle into a brainstorming session, either alone or with a group of people, you need to recognize that the most stupid ideas ... the dumbest ideas in the universe will likely come to all of you at the beginning.

Yes, Virginia. Contrary to what all the feel-good teachers and self-help books out there tell you ... there are stupid questions. And stupid ideas. From very smart people. And stupid people. And they tend to come up at the beginning of most brainstorming sessions.

How are you going to limit the enrollment of students at the university to just 600? Well ... we could highlight the local crime situation and drive the extra applicants away out of fear, or we could ... and you come up with a number of other seriously deranged ideas. They will come to you. Guaranteed. And unless you unload them properly (I suggest a three-step process), they're going to keep cluttering up your head, and keep you from moving on in an inspired manner. You're going to keep thinking about making frogs walk backwards. Or something just as stupid and irrelevant.

**This is pretty important:** Everyone, in the group or working alone, always has the unquestioned right to contribute what may seem to be a silly or stupid idea

at any time, not just at the beginning. No special permission is ever needed to get silly ... anyone who sets you up to believe you need special permission is not really brainstorming smartly. The freedom to spontaneously be outrageous is exactly what makes brainstorming break from the accepted thought patterns and address an issue creatively. So all ideas, from inspired and on-target, to so-silly-it's-stupid must be honestly encouraged throughout the session.

**Stupid ideas ... second, get rid of them:** This is a corrupted bit from the practice of Zen, where you have to deal with random thoughts cluttering your mind as you practice your Zen activity. This activity is to be done with a clear mind or no-mind, so it needs to be “uncluttered” of unwanted thoughts. The solution goes like this:

Acknowledge the thought as it comes to you. Do not fight it, do not evaluate it, do not bother yourself with it. Just recognize that it has come to you. You might even nod your head in acceptance of its presence.

Say the thought so it can be recorded (or given recognition, if you're alone).

Tell the thought that it has received recognition and that it is to leave now.

It's that simple. The thought will leave. You may be surprised at how effective this is. You'll find it also works for those troubling, anxiety-producing thoughts that might keep you awake at night. Don't fight it. Recognize it, state it, and tell it that it's time for it to leave. As with everything else in this book, it will take some practice to get a handle on it, but you'll get good with it if you give it the time and effort it deserves.

This is a primo way of letting thoughts flow and pass ... do spend the time to get good at it.

### ***Brainstorming and multitasking.***

Don't multitask when you're brainstorming.

Turn the damned phone off, kill your e-mail notification beep if you've got one going, and tell everyone to leave you the hell alone.

There is no way you can realistically learn to brainstorm or think creatively about anything if you have conflicting demands working on your mental processes. Anything that pulls you from continuous, extended time with the problem is a conflicting demand.

Research has consistently shown that when we multitask, the resulting work is not as good as when we devote our time to each thing individually. I can tell you as a teacher, that I believed I could tell when someone lost their train of thought because they were multitasking. There were breaks in the work, a lack of a single thread holding it all together ... something small but real, that hurts the overall idea.

Please allow yourself exclusive time to learn how to do this kind of exploration.

***Okay, then. closing out this chapter,  
here's the best thing to take from it ...***

**Question every assumption ...** This statement is no political 1960's bumper sticker saying, "Question Authority." This is far more important. Far more powerful. "Question every assumption." Make it your mantra. Because when you accept conventional thinking or the boundaries drawn by assumptions, you cannot be creative. When you accept conventional thinking or boundaries, you accept the way things are.

That will kill the soul.