



Why Inspiration Matters

How Our Spark Advances the
Science of Human Thriving

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“Inspiration is the greatest gift because it opens your life to many new possibilities. Each day becomes more meaningful, and your life is enhanced when your actions are guided by what inspires you.”

– Bernie S. Siegel, Pediatric Surgeon, Speaker, and Author

A BREATH OF LIFE

There are three principles on which human life flourishes.¹ First, humans are naturally different and diverse. Of the estimated 60 to 100 billion people who live or have ever lived on planet Earth, no two people are, were, or ever will be the same. In our individuality and uniqueness, every life is inspiring and singular, every life is an extraordinary, un-repeatable, improvised moment in time. There never was nor ever will be an individual with your unique and exclusive abilities and passion. This “breath of life” is the origin and essence of inspiration as we are inherently different and diverse beings.

Second, humans are naturally inquisitive and curious. We need, want, and desire to know and understand our self, others, and our world. It is our nature to nurture our intellect along with our insights and intuition; we instinctively want to know the meaning of thoughts and things. In understanding meanings in life, we determine their significance, relevance, and value for our self and others; we determine that which is appropriate and effective, worthwhile and beneficial. Arising out of our inspiration, we are, as expected, inquisitive and curious; we want to learn, know, and understand the meaning of things giving us hope, purpose, and direction in life.²

Third, humans are naturally imaginative and creative. Unlike other living beings, we have the ability to bring into mind things that are not present to our senses.³ In understanding and appreciating this, Albert Einstein suggested, “Your imagination is everything. It is the preview of life’s coming attractions.” In our imagination, we can revisit the past and even launch into the future. Moreover, we can anticipate and to some extent predict, we can speculate and hypothesize, and we can originate and acknowledge various concepts, ideas, and points of view. More importantly, we can create that which is new, more or less, better or different by putting our imagination to work for the value innovation and invention offer us; we can create that which fulfills and satisfies our needs, wants, and desires in life. Arising out of our inspiration, we are inherently imaginative and creative.

It happens, then, that inspiration is essential to our individuality and distinctiveness in life, inspiring our imagination and creativity, our curiosity and learning, our passions, talents, and skills. Inspiration is essential to who we are being and becoming established in our unique thoughts and feelings, in our communications and relations with others, in the choices we make and in the actions we take. And although we have a general sense of the word inspiration and although we imperfectly use the word on occasion to

reference imagination, innovation, ingenuity, or other similar ideas, what exactly is this thing called inspiration?

THE BREATH OF INSPIRATION

Turning to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we acquire a more accurate understanding of the word and its associated meanings as well as its etymology. Inspiration has its origin in Latin from the verb *inspirare* which means to blow into or to breathe upon; *inspirare* stems from the prefix *in* and the root *spirare* to breathe. The Latin noun *inspirationem*, meaning the action of breathing upon, derives from *inspirare* and provides the basis for *inspiracion* in Old French which literally references the act of inhaling or breathing in rather than breathing upon. Later in Middle English, taking on a spiritual or religious context, the meaning of the word *inspire* was to influence, guide, or move into a discourse or an action through a divine influence or a mystical power. Coming from the Latin *spiritus* meaning breath, the word *inspire* thus shares a connection with spirit, spirituality, and religion. In some cultures, it was or continues to be the opinion or belief that inspiration comes from the muses or the gods above; in other cultures, the shared belief is that inspiration is a divine matter and that it comes from a mystical or supernatural power or that inspiration is truly a gift of God.

Today, inspiration still holds some of its original meaning as an act of respiration; that is, breathing in or drawing into the lungs a breath. Inspiration is more commonly understood, however, as a sensation of being enthused or the experience of enthusing others. As a side note, the origin of the words enthuse and enthusiasm is from the Greek *entheos* meaning divinely inspired or possessed by God; it stems from the prefix *en* meaning in or involving and the root *theos* meaning a god.

THE NATURE OF INSPIRATION

Sensing something new in life, we “breathe into our mind” this unique concept or idea, exquisite thought or thing, ex-

ceptional experience or event, and it awakens something in us; it creates an impression or impulse or some elevated feeling or perception or some exalted sensation; it transcends our limitations and current concerns. In this manner, inspiration is a quality of being mentally inspired, stimulated, and excited to feel something as well as a quality of being enthused and motivated to do something. As such, inspiration involves being inspired by something as it also involves being motivated to take an action based on the inspiration.⁴ What makes inspiration inspiring is that nothing in life drives our development and growth like inspiration. Inspiration is the breath of life, the fuel of our imagination and creativity. We see something we never saw before; we hear something that we never heard before; and it takes hold of us. It captures our attention and ignites our inter-

est; it moves, touches, and inspires us giving us new meaning, purpose, and direction for who we are and what we can achieve in life.

“Nothing in life drives our development and growth like inspiration, the fuel of our imagination and creativity.”

We are reminded by the ancient Indian sage, Patanjali, that, “When you are inspired by some great purpose, some extraordinary project, all your thoughts break their bonds; your mind transcends limitations; your

consciousness expands in every direction; and you find yourself in a great, new, and wonderful world. Dormant forces, faculties, and talents become alive and you discover yourself to be a greater person by far than you ever dreamed yourself to be.” And from the German philosopher, theologian, and poet associated with the Enlightenment, Johann Gottfried Herder suggests, “Without inspiration the best powers of the mind remain dormant. There is a fuel in us which needs to be ignited with sparks.”

THE QUALITIES OF INSPIRATION

In their extensive work studying inspiration, psychologists Todd M. Thrash and Andrew J. Elliot define three principal qualities of inspiration.⁴ First, inspiration is evoked naturally; it is stirred up spontaneously in the mind without intention. Psychologist Victor Shamas suggests, however, in his recent studies regarding creative inspiration, that

we can also intentionally enhance our receptivity to being inspired, in our openness to the experience, by creating, causing, and living in a space of inspiration.^{5,6} Nevertheless, the experience of inspiration occurs in the moment arising naturally and spontaneously.

Second, inspiration is uplifting and transcendent surpassing our normal mindfulness, interests, and concerns; going beyond the limitations of our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. Such transcendence frequently involves moments of freshness and brightness, clearness and awareness for new possibilities and opportunities. We are awakened. According to Thrash and Elliot, “The heights of human motivation spring from the beauty and goodness that precede us and awaken us to better possibilities.”

Third, inspiration involves motivation in various forms; that is to say, inspiration involves inspiring and being inspired, motivating and being motivated. Besides *inspiring* others, we are *inspired by* people, thoughts, and things and we are *inspired to* take an action.

Thrash and Elliot assert that “the core component characteristics of inspiration reflect the combination of two component processes” of being inspired by and being inspired to.⁷ They suggest that “it is possible to *be inspired by* without *being inspired to*” when there are no “obvious implications for action” and, as a result, there is wonderful individual value in being inspired by. Ultimately, however, in being inspired to, inspiration should move, touch, and inspire us to act on that which inspires us to perform, produce, or procure something or to imagine, create, and accomplish something which we are excited, energized, and enthused about doing as some form of contribution to our self and (or) others.

We act on our inspiration by imagining new possibilities in our imagination, by creating original ideas in our creativity, and by putting our ideas into practice.³ Shamas asserts, “There is nothing more contagious than inspiration; inspiration is to imagine and create.” Author, speaker, and international advisor on education, Sir Ken Robinson reminds us that from inspiration, “We have the power of

Three Principal Qualities of Inspiration

SOURCE: Thrash, T.M. and Elliot, A. J. (2003).
Inspiration as a Psychological Construct.⁴

[1] STIMULATION

Inspiration is stirred up naturally and spontaneously in the mind without intention in the moment

[2] TRANSCENDENCE

Inspiration is uplifting and transcendent surpassing our normal mindfulness interests, and concerns

[3] MOTIVATION

Inspiration is engaging, exciting, enthusing, and energizing; it is being inspired by and being inspired to

imagination and what flows from it, the power of creativity.” And although imagination and creativity are the engine of innovation, inspiration is the fuel that drives it. Without inspiration, there is no imagination; without imagination, no creativity; and without creativity, there is nothing. Inspiration is at the source of all creation. As our spark in life, it calls us into action for what we can imagine and what we can create that is new; what we can create that is more or less, better or different. George Lois, art director, designer, and author, puts it rather tersely, “Nothing comes from nothing. You must continually feed the inner beast that sparks and inspires.”

Psychologist and author Scott B. Kaufman writes, “In a culture obsessed with measuring talent and ability, we often overlook the important role of inspiration. Inspiration awakens us to new possibilities by allowing us to transcend our ordinary experiences and limitations. Inspiration propels a person from apathy to possibility and transforms the way we perceive our own capabilities.”⁸ And according to psychologist Peter L. Benson, inspiration is the “human spark” that is essential to human thriving. He says, “Life feels the richest and fullest” when we are inspired.² Transcending our ordinary experiences and limitations, inspiration not only transforms the way we perceive our abilities, but it also nourishes our passions and enhances our talents and skills.

THE INSPIRATION SCALE

In their efforts to measure inspiration frequency and intensity with people, Thrash and Elliot developed an Inspiration Scale.* Demonstrating strong psychometric properties, the Inspiration Scale consists of four subscale measurements creating awareness and understanding for the internal consistency, temporal stability, and measurement invariance associated with our day-to-day experiences of inspiration across time and across populations.”⁴ Constructs of interest from the study indicate that the Inspiration Scale predicts an assortment of positive qualities that are clearly associated with inspired people as well as it also predicts their intrinsic motivation, approach behavior, creativity, openness and receptivity to new experiences. Besides motivation, behavior, creativity, and receptivity, inspired people are more energized, engaged, excited, and enthusiastic as revealed in their elevated levels of positive affect and task involvement.

According to Thrash and Elliot, inspired people are also more determined and motivated, meticulous and conscientious, cooperative and collaborative. They have a greater sense of competence and expertise; a greater belief in their passions, talents, and skills; and a greater hopefulness and optimism in life. What’s more, inspired people have higher levels of imagination and creativity leading to higher levels of performance, productivity, and accomplishment. Kaufman writes, “Inspired people view themselves as more creative and show actual increases in self-ratings of creativity over time.”⁷

To that point, a powerful relation is observed between setting goals and being inspired. According to a study conducted by Carleton University psychology professor Marina Milyavskaya and others, “Goal progress and goal inspiration build on each other to form a cycle of greater

goal inspiration and greater goal pursuit.”⁹ Using scores from the Inspiration Scale as predictors, high-scoring individuals pursue and achieve their inspired goals more easily and successfully. As expected, they make greater overall progress than others suggesting deeply inspired people are more optimistic in setting goals and more successful in attaining them. “The Milyavskaya et al. study,” according to University of Massachusetts psychology Professor Emerita Susan Krauss Whitbourne, “suggests that the more readily you are inspired, the more inspiring the goals you set for yourself and the more motivated you remain to pursue those goals,”¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, high-scoring individuals in the study also reported more gratitude and purpose in life.

*“Inspiration is the source
of all creativity.*

*Without inspiration,
there is no imagination;
without imagination,
there is no creativity;
and without creativity
there is nothing.”*

This brings us to another intriguing point, the relationship between being inspired and wellbeing. Documented in a set of four studies conducted by Thrash, Elliot, Maruskin, and Cassidy, inspiration “enhances purpose in life and gratitude which, in turn, promote wellbeing.”¹¹ The Thrash et al. studies provide evidence that inspiration enhances our wellbeing in our experiences of meaning and purpose, being grateful and thankful, and being satisfied and happy. Amongst all

the benefits and qualities stemming from inspiration, our imagination and creativity are supreme for without imagination, there is no creativity and without creativity, there is nothing. Inspiration is at the source of imagination and all creation. It is the spark that excites, enthuses, and energizes us to satisfy our hopes, wishes, and desires; it is the spark that stirs, stimulates, and inspires us to satisfy our wants and needs in life giving us meaning, purpose, and direction, happiness and wellbeing.

“The common currency of being human is that life is created,” says Robinson; “Life is a constant process of created positions and improvisations.”¹² In view of this, he reminds us of the importance of our imagination and being inspired saying, “You create your life as you move through it and you create it with the opportunities you see around

* See addendum; page 7.

you, the talents you find within you, and whether you are open to both.”¹³

IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY

Robinson further declares, “We are all born with deep talents and abilities. If you are a human being, it comes with the kit.” He goes on to say, “The most distinctive feature of human life is the power of imagination.” Robinson underscores the power of imagination in that it arises in our inspiration and so, from our inspiration and imagination, creativity flows. We are creative when we are imaginative; and we are imaginative when we are inspired.

Like Robinson, artist Pablo Picasso suggests we are all born with deep talents and abilities occurring as inspiration, imagination, and creativity. Picasso says “All children are born artists. The problem is to remain an artist as we grow up.” Although inspiration, imagination, and creativity are inherent in all of us, at some time or another, we forget or we overlook the importance of these gifts for creating our lives. During our early development and growth, Robinson claims that we grow out of our creativity because we do not principally emphasize the importance of inspiration and imagination in our culture.¹⁴

Referring to the power of imagination as well, Kaufman proposes, “The link between inspiration and creativity is consistent with the transcendent aspect of inspiration, since creativity involves seeing possibility beyond existing constraints.”⁷ Seeing possibility beyond existing constraints is, of course, imagining possibility by using our imagination. The phrase beyond existing constraints brings to mind the metaphor of out-of-the-box thinking. It means to think creatively without any existing constraints imposed by a so-called box; it also means to think creatively from a new or different perspective. “Creative thinking is thinking outside the box but,” as Shamas reminds us, “it is your thinking that creates the box.”⁶ Whether we are thinking outside or inside a box, creativity is all about imagining possibility beyond what we think are the existing constraints. Consistent with Robinson reminding us that we create life as we move through it, Shamas likes to sum up our creativity concisely by saying we are the “creator creating creation.”⁵

And it all begins with inspiration.

When asked to distinguish creativity, Robinson defines it elegantly saying, “Creativity is the process of having original ideas that have value.” He points out that there are three important aspects to creativity in his definition.³ First, creativity is an evolutionary process and, in that process, creative work develops and progresses by creating and producing it. Accordingly, creativity is an exchange or conversation between ideas and materials. Second, creativity has an element of original thinking and, in that thinking (our imagination), the originality of the idea is new, unusual, and special to the creator. In meeting this criteria, original ideas need only be original to the creator and not necessarily original to others. Third, creativity has value and, in that value, the original idea is purposeful, meaningful, and worthwhile.

Turning imaginative, new ideas into reality is the essence of creativity. As such, creativity involves two separate and distinct processes of, first, imagining ideas and, second, producing them. We often conflate the thinking and doing, the imagining and producing, as one process. Nevertheless, what we imagine, in the final analysis, always comes first before that which we produce. Harvard Business School

Three Principal Components of Creativity

SOURCE: Robinson, K. (2017). *What Is Creativity*.³

“Creativity is the process of having original ideas that have value.”

[1] EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

Creative work gradually develops and progresses from earlier creative work in a process of creating and producing over time

[2] ORIGINAL THINKING

Creative work develops and progresses in the imagination from the originality of a new, special, and unusual idea to the creator

[3] INDIVIDUAL VALUE

Creative work has value in that the original idea, product, and outcome are purposeful, meaningful, and fulfilling to the creator

marketing professor, author, and economist Theodore Levitt reminds us that, “Nothing drives progress like the imagination. The idea precedes the deed. The only exceptions are accidents and natural selection.”¹⁵ The creative process is imagining that which inspires us to create and then creating it.

Others share their perspectives on the process as well. According to psychologist Rollo R. May, “Creativity is the process of bringing something new into being. It brings to our awareness what was previously hidden and points to new life.”¹⁶ This idea is similar to what Robinson suggests when he says we create life in our imagination and creativity. What’s more, May contends that creativity through imagination requires inspiration; the creative experience is one of “heightened consciousness” as well as enthusiasm, excitement, “passion and commitment.” Along the same line, author and business consultant Linda Naiman states that creativity is characterized by our ability to perceive the world in new ways by making connections and discovering patterns among outwardly unconnected, dissimilar thoughts and things and by bringing something new into being in those patterns and connections.¹⁷

CREATIVITY AND LIFE

Creativity is indispensable to human progress. Essential to advancing, nurturing, and sustaining life, creativity plays a fundamental role in society and business, education and life sciences, and virtually in all areas of human endeavor. Without creativity there is nothing new, there is nothing more or less, better or different in life. In business, for example, creativity is at the core of innovation for creating and providing goods and services of value. The bottom line for business depends on creativity for its performance and productivity, its sales and market share, growth and development, revenues and profit.

In life sciences, creativity is at the heart of health, healing, and wellbeing providing innovation for new pharmaceuti-

cals and med-surg products, therapies, diagnostics, interventions, care protocols, and more. Creativity advances the quality, cost-effectiveness of health care while it contributes to our quality of life.

And when it comes to education, creativity is vital to our children’s development and growth. Robinson says, “Creativity, now, is as important in education as literacy. We should treat it with the same status.” While the role of the teacher is to facilitate learning, the overall role of education is to awaken and develop the powers of creativity in children in their learning experiences. According to Robinson, curiosity is the engine of learning, achievement, and creativity.^{1,14} “If you can light the spark of curiosity in a child,” he says, “they will learn without any other assistance.” Since children and, for that matter, most people “don’t know what they are capable of, no real sense of their talents and abilities,” according to Robinson, inspiration, imagination, and creativity are essential to education helping us discover and develop our true potential.¹⁸

*“We are born with
the inherent capacity for
unlimited creativity with
the power of our
inspiration and imagination.”*

Robinson asserts that humans are born with immense possibilities.¹⁹ We are born with the inherent capacity for unlimited creativity through our powers of inspiration and imagination, our instinct and intuition, intellect and insight, arousing possibilities and opportunities for us to grow and develop to our full potential. In view of that, creativity is indispensable to our development and growth especially that our children know what moves, touches, and inspires them in life; that our children know their spark and are known by it.

In a series of studies conducted by Peter L. Benson and the Search Institute,² youth were asked, “What is it about your life that gives you joy and energy.” They were also asked, “What is it about you that gives your life a sense of purpose and what is it that is good, beautiful, and useful about you?” According to Benson, all study participants were able to ultimately report one if not two or more sparks

that inspire them, that excite, energize, enthuse, and even encourage them in their life. From the study, more than 220 kinds of sparks were identified and categorized into three principal categories established along the sources of the participants' inspiration whether their sparks originate, first, in their commitment and purpose to something in life; or their sparks originate, second, in their talents, skills, and aptitude; or their sparks originate, third, in their character, qualities, or way of being; for example, if their spark originates in being empathetic, generous, caring, or compassionate.

Based on these studies, Benson contends the *science of human thriving* is to identify our human spark and how we awake to it, how we develop and grow creatively in our inspiration and imagination, and how we are known by our spark.² From these studies, Benson suggests, "All youth want people to know them through the lens of their spark."²⁰ Inspiration and imagination awaken us to who we

are and what we can become. Ophelia said it best in Shakespeare's Hamlet, "We know what we are, but not what we may be." It's exciting, energizing, and enthusing to discover what we may become in our inspiration.

Being inspired and being inspiring, there is something vital about inspiration especially in fulfilling our needs, wants, and desires in life; for being extraordinary and unstoppable, creative and fully self-expressed; for being empowered, satisfied, and happy. Inspiration is the source of our imagination and thus the lifeblood of our passions, talents, and skills for all our creativity and achievement. Inspiration matters because we matter; it gives each of us our own hope and meaning in life, purpose and direction, so we live a life we love and love the life we live. Benson likes to ask us, "What is your spark, your spirit, your breath?" From that which inspires you, what can you imagine, what will you create with your one precious, extraordinary life?

ADDENDUM

Inspiration Scale

Below are four statements, each followed by two questions.

The questions concern how often and how deeply / strongly you experience what is described in the statement.

Please answer both questions after each statement by circling numbers from 1 to 7.

1. I experience inspiration.

1A. How often does this happen?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	NEVER						VERY OFTEN
1B. How deeply or strongly (in general)?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	NOT AT ALL						VERY OFTEN OR STRONGLY

KEY TO THE INSPIRATION SCALE

Inspiration Frequency Subscale
Sum of items:
1A, 2A, 3A, 4A

2. Something I encounter or experience inspires me.

2A. How often does this happen?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	NEVER						VERY OFTEN
2B. How deeply or strongly (in general)?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	NOT AT ALL						VERY OFTEN OR STRONGLY

Inspiration Intensity Subscale
Sum of items:
1B, 2B, 3B, 4B

3. I am inspired to do something.

3A. How often does this happen?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	NEVER						VERY OFTEN
3B. How deeply or strongly (in general)?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	NOT AT ALL						VERY OFTEN OR STRONGLY

Overall Evaluation Scale
Sum of items
1A, 1B, 2A, 2B,
3A, 3B, 4A, 4B

4. I feel inspired.

4A. How often does this happen?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	NEVER						VERY OFTEN
4B. How deeply or strongly (in general)?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	NOT AT ALL						VERY OFTEN OR STRONGLY

SOURCE:

Thrash, T.M. and Elliot, A. J. (2003).
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Construct. *Journal of Personality and
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