

ARTISTS AND THEIR NEUROSES

QUEST CLUB January 8, 2010

Barbara Daniel

Artists and their Neuroses

Artists and their Neuroses: this is the age-old question of the relationship between genius, madness and perception. This is the same thing Socrates addressed In *Phaedrus*, saying "Madness, provided it comes as the gift of heaven, is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings... the men of old who gave things their names saw no disgrace or reproach in madness... So, according to the evidence provided by our ancestors, madness is a nobler thing than sober sense... madness comes from God, whereas sober sense is merely human." As far back as we can know people have intuited a relationship between artistic creativity and different mental status.

Today I'm not going to regale you with tales of particular artists or crazy antics but rather explore what is known now about the intersection of creativity and mental status and the great deal that remains to be understood.

Defining creativity I started in a conversation with Adie Baach who immediately said "creativity is the ability to make unexpected connections". That seems to be pretty much the consensus. Arthur Koestler expands on the notion: "The creative act consists in combining previously unrelated structures in such a way that you get more out of the emergent whole than you have put in...." He goes on, "The motions of the tides have been known to man since time immemorial. So have the motions of the moon. But the idea to relate the two, the idea that the tides were due to the attraction of the moon,

occurred, as far as we know, for the first time to a German astronomer in the seventeenth century, and when Galileo read about it, he laughed it off as an occult fancy.”

So creativity consists in combining two different frames of reference, each with its own set of rules or boxes. To follow through with the same example, we think of the tides in the context of *the sea*, and when we're not thinking about them, we keep them in the *sea* box. The moon, though, belongs to *the sky* or maybe *the night*, and we keep it there. Taking both of them out of their contexts, leaving behind all the rules and assumptions that go with them and putting them together in a new way, constitutes creativity.

Creativity at its heart is about being different, about looking at the world in a different way. It has been said that creativity is human potential made manifest or the quest for the unattainable.

A study from the University of Toronto and Harvard shows that creative people appear to be more open than the rest of us to incoming stimuli from the surrounding environment. Humans unconsciously use a process known as *latent inhibition* to screen and ignore stimuli experience has shown to be irrelevant. Among those tested, those classified as 'eminent creative achievers' were seven times more likely to have low latent inhibition scores: that means they discarded possibilities much less readily. The authors believe it appears that low levels of latent inhibition and exceptional flexibility in thought might

predispose to mental illness under some conditions and to creative accomplishment in others. From the common association of mental illness and creativity, we might theorize a third alternative involving both.

Tobi Zausner says that we are all creative at some level, that every decision we make is a creative response to our present circumstances. He posits a continuum from the everyday creativity we all experience to what is called eminent creativity, experienced by those whose lives focus on creativity, the rare creative geniuses.

Leslie Owen Wilson at the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point developed a creativity index to estimate individuals' levels of creativity. These are the characteristics measured as they are seen to be typical of highly creative individuals:

- They are curious;
- When presented with a topic, they generate many responses and ideas and solutions; they can manipulate ideas easily by changing, elaborating, adapting or improving them;
- They are opinionated;
- They are willing to take risks;
- They are unusually aware of their impulses;
- They experience heightened emotional sensitivity; and
- They are frequently perceived as nonconforming, individualistic and different.

Michael Fitzgerald further tells us that creative artists must have extraordinary levels of energy and motivation and a tremendous capacity for observation and concentration... They must have a vast curiosity and be driven to understand the world in an artistic way and also to rebel and go against the artistic mode of expression of their time. Their contemporaries often perceive them to be arrogant, egocentric and narcissistic... they are very commonly discontented and conflicted.

Kay Redfield Jamison adds, "Creative people have to not care what others think about them, because in the creative process, when you come up with a new idea, a creative idea, what is really fascinating is that all the best, most wonderful creative ideas have always met with a huge amount of resistance when someone first came up with them.... It's not just that you have to come up with new and original ideas, you have got to be able to put up with resistance and fight to get your idea accepted."

Focusing on this first side of our equation, creativity, we need to give a nod to the fact that it is not confined to the arts. All innovation requires the kind of divergent thinking that connects what has not been connected before, or, more accurately, sees connections that have not been seen before. Some of the most creative thinking occurs in the sciences, and the difficulty and delay in the acceptance of new data and ideas extends there as well.

The other side of the equation is mental status. The vast majority of the perceived relationships between creativity and mental illness relate to what are known as *mood disorders*. Again, like creativity, mood is a continuum from depressive through so-called “normal” and mixed moods into hypomania and mania, which can slide into psychosis.

depressive normal/mixed hypomanic manic psychotic

The question then is how these continua intersect and interact. At present a great deal of research is ongoing and as always there exist more questions than answers. At the same time, much has been learned, and we’ll look at some of that in a moment.

The most commonly cited mental illness related to creativity is the association of the artistic and manic-depressive temperaments, of moods and imagination, in manic-depressive or bipolar disease. For those with manic-depressive disorder, moods cycle across the continuum and back over and over again with varying, usually increasing, degrees of intensity. Manic-depressive disease affects about 1% of the population overall; of course, not all manic-depressive people are artists, nor do all artists experience manic-depression. Those who are manic-depressive may find themselves unable to be overtly productive in depression where the whole world may look like gloom and boundaries. Often they then experience great energy, creative thinking, depth of emotion, expansiveness and productivity in the manic stages, especially in the milder hypomania, often at the beginning of a manic phase.

Kay Redfield Jamison, herself both a psychiatrist and teacher and manic-depressive, tells us: “Many of the changes in mood, thinking and perception that characterize the mildly manic states – restlessness, ebullience, expansiveness, irritability, grandiosity, quickened and more finely tuned senses, intensity of emotional experiences, diversity of thought, and rapidity of associational processes – are highly characteristic of creative thought as well.”

She goes on to explain however that for the manic-depressive person the entire cycle may be necessary to the creative process. She says, “Mania and hypomania do not act alone. Mild depression can act as ballast; ... Depression prunes and sculpts; it also ruminates and ponders and, ultimately, subdues and focuses thought. It allows structuring, at a detailed level, of the more expansive patterns woven during hypomania... mild melancholy, sensitivity, compassion, questioning, brooding... Research shows observations and beliefs produced during mildly depressed states are actually closer to ‘reality’ than are those formed in more normal mood states.”

Virginia Wolfe confirms: “But it is always a question whether I wish to avoid these glooms ... a plunge into deep waters, which is a little alarming, but full of interest ... There is an edge to it which I feel is of great importance ... One goes down into the well and nothing protects one from the assault of truth.”

Many studies have been done looking at creativity and manic-depressive disorder. Terence Kettler, M.D., said he became interested in the link between mental illness and creativity after noticing that patients who came through the bipolar clinic, this is at Stanford, despite having problems, were extraordinarily bright, motivated people who “tended to lead interesting lives.” He began a scholarly pursuit of this link, and in 2002 published a study that showed that healthy artists, that is artists who do not have a mental illness diagnosis, were more similar in personality to individuals with manic-depressive disorder, the majority of whom were on medication, than to healthy people in the general population.

In the 1970’s, Nancy C. Andreasen of the University of Iowa examined a group of 30 creative writers and found 80% had experienced at least one episode of major depression, hypomania, or mania, compared with 30% of the control group. Incidence was also higher in first degree relatives of the writers than in the controls.

A few years later, Kay Redfield Jamison studied 47 British writers, painters and sculptors from the Royal Academy. She found that 38% had been treated for manic-depressive disorder. In particular, half of the poets, the largest group with manic depression, had needed medication or hospitalization.

Jamison also cites elevated rates of alcohol and drug abuse and addiction in individuals with manic-depressive disorder, overall seeing in 60% some history of substance abuse. It

is difficult to know to what extent this may involve self-medicating in the face of the disease. She quotes Edgar Allen Poe speaking of “long periods of horrible sanity... my enemies referred the insanity to the drink rather than the drink to the insanity.”

Researchers at Harvard University set up a study to assess the degree of original thinking to perform creative tasks. They were going to rate creativity in a sample of manic depressive patients. This is coming at it from the other side: other studies started from creative people and looked for manic-depressive disorder; this started with manic-depressive patients and looked at their creativity. Their results showed again that manic depressive people have a significantly higher level of creativity than the controls. Biographical studies of earlier generations of artists and writers show that they have up to 18 times the rate of suicide, as compared to the general population, 8 to 10 times the rate of unipolar depression and 10 to 20 times the rate of manic-depressive disorder.

Manic-depressive disease has long been known to frequently have a genetic basis, running strongly in some families. Kathy Bayes of the local chapter of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill states that where both parents are manic-depressive, likelihood is 80% that a child will be as well. Interestingly, children of manic-depressive artists, whether manic-depressive themselves or not, are also found to be very high on creativity measures.

A 2-part study at the University of Northern Iowa aimed to identify who in the arts was more apt to suffer from mental illness. Part I analyzed signs of mental illness in 1,629 writers, male and female, comparing rates of mental illness between fiction writers, poets, playwrights, and non-fiction writers. Results indicated that female poets were significantly more likely to have mental illness than any other category of writer. Non-fiction writers were found least likely. We don't know whether the nature and focus of the work affects mental status, or whether individuals may be drawn to the work that fits the status they already have.

Part 2 of the same study analyzed the lives of 520 noteworthy women categorized as poets, fiction writers, playwrights, non-fiction writers, journalists, visual artists, politicians, public officials and actresses. Again female poets, in what has come to be known as the Sylvia Plath Effect, were seen to be significantly more likely to suffer mental illness and to experience personal tragedy.

While manic-depressive disease predominates in our awareness, evidence also exists of connection between creativity and autism, ADD/ADHD, epilepsy and possibly dementia. Some suffer depression, with or without accompanying addictions, without cycling to other moods.

Michael Fitzgerald writes of Asperger's Syndrome, a high-functioning autism, where creativity may be associated with the arts but often tends toward science, physics and engineering. He uses six diagnostic criteria:

- Social impairment
- Narrowness of interests
- Repetitive routines
- Speech and language problems
- Non-verbal communication problems and
- Motor clumsiness.

Using these criteria, Fitzgerald studied well-known artistic creators whose lives and persons are extensively documented to determine whether they might today be diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. His book identifies 21 prominent writers, philosophers, musicians and painters as probably having Asperger's: he includes Herman Melville, William Butler Yeats, Arthur Conan Doyle, Mozart, Beethoven, Van Gogh and Andy Warhol. Having two lists of artists, one claiming manic-depressive disease and one, Asperger's, I couldn't resist comparing and found only Van Gogh on both lists. He also suffered epilepsy.

So on all sides we have claims and evidence of some connections between creativity and mental illness. On the other hand, skeptics remain and some believe any link is more apparent than real:

- Some point to John Nash, the Nobel economist portrayed in the film *A Beautiful Mind*, making the point that since he is the only Nobel economist most of us know, we generalize his illness and give it attention all out of proportion.
- Some believe a bias in favor of a link skews judgements in awarding positions and prizes.
- Some simply suspect artists of claiming mental illness to excuse bad behavior.

Some others inclined to see a real connection posit a two-factor idea with one factor for creativity (perhaps divergent thinking, intensely felt emotions and drive to communicate) and one factor for resilience or ability to cope with stress, the ability to function in the world. They point out that a key tension exists in that the artist must look at the world in his or her own creative way and then also see the world through other people's eyes in order to live and interact.

Others point to the intensity of feelings and the desire to communicate emotions that appear to drive artistic creativity. They theorize a common cognitive underpinning between creativity and mental illness, both involving thinking deeply about intense feelings. When artists were asked specifically about the importance of very intense moods in the development and execution of their work, 9 of 10 stated that such moods were either integral and necessary (60%) or very important (30%).

Point of view proves critical too, whether one looks at mental status from the inside or the outside:

- In 1991 Joyce Carol Oates had this to say: “[Emily Dickinson] was not an alcoholic, she was not abusive, she was not neurotic, she did not commit suicide. Neurotic people or alcoholics who go through life make better copy, and people talk about them, tell anecdotes about them. The quiet people just do their work.”
- Emily Dickinson herself wrote:

“And something’s odd -- within --
That person that I was –
And this one do not feel the same –
Could it be Madness – this?”

Some researchers have suggested creativity may be a compensatory advantage to manic-depressive disorder. When asked, a substantial majority of manic-depressive patients perceived both short- and long-term positive effects from their illness:

- They saw significant increase in overall alertness and sensitivity, productivity and creativity in periods of hypomania, and
- 80% reported greater overall sensitivity as a result of their manic-depressive disorder.
- Unipolar or major depressive patients did not perceive the same benefits.

On a fascinating blog where bipolar people, mostly young, communicate and attempt to help themselves and each other, Keri, age 29, wrote “Maybe having bipolar isn’t such a bad thing. People feel sorry for you and label it as an illness but I see it as riding storms and seeing sunsets the average person may never see.”

The *Oxford Companion to the Mind* suggests: “... it is necessary to consider the idea that genius and madness are closely allied. It is not true, of course, that great poets, painters, scientists and mathematicians are mad: far from it. On the other hand, it may well be that they work as intensely and imaginatively as they do in order to remain sane; but they have access to the mind’s functioning from which those who live more staid and conventional lives are excluded. And it is this access which gives their work both its flair and its sense of risk.”

Debate is also ongoing about the desirability and impact of treatment, especially of medication, for artists with mental illnesses. Albert Rothenberg, MD, of Harvard Medical School argues that mental illnesses disrupt the cognitive and emotional processes necessary for successful creativity. Rothenberg advocates that highly creative people do better when they are treated for their mental illnesses.

Mogens Schou, M.D., who is credited with first introducing and moderating the use of lithium to treat manic-depressive patients, found that for people with severe bipolar disorder, lithium improved their ability to create. On the other hand, for those who relied

on manic highs or a little depression to be creative, lithium seemed to decrease productivity. He advocated that treatment must remain an individual decision.

Kay Redfield Jamison speaks candidly of her own experience. Initially she struggled passionately as many do against accepting medication but came to realize she would not long survive without it. Now she is grateful that her disease is responsive to lithium, which enables her to continue her life and work. At the same time, she is much more than a bit wistful about remembered highs she now foregoes.

Considering findings on gender, family, personality, professions and biology, the link between creativity and mental illness appears to be very complex, having a wide variety of contributing factors. Many theories have been posed; however, most of the research has been quasi-experimental. Since participants cannot be randomly assigned to a creative group or a mental illness group, it is difficult to control for extraneous variables. Although trends of mental illness among creative individuals appear to be quite pronounced, the connections are unclear.

The strong correlation found between mental illness and creativity is relevant: relevant to individuals with mental illnesses, relevant to creative individuals, and relevant to society in general. To many with mental illnesses, creativity is a valued and central aspect of their identity. Increased understanding of the roles and importance of creative processes

empower therapy to many. Understanding the risks of mental illness in creative persons can both foster creativity and allow gifted individuals to reach their full potential.

From a longer and broader viewpoint, we consider what artists have contributed and now contribute to our world and our understandings of it. Nigel Spivey in his BBC series and book, *How Art Made the World, how humans made art and art made us human*, talks of the very earliest artists, telling tales or painting on cave walls. He says “Only we humans have the imaginative power to make symbols to represent not only the world around us, but also what goes on within our heads.” He believes that like us those first artists invented and painted and sang ...

- To tell stories,
- To create social hierarchies,
- To connect with the environment,
- To express the supernatural,
- To make images of themselves and others, and
- To mitigate the hard fact of mortality.

The richness and beauty afforded us through all the achievements of all the artists through all the centuries is a great heritage. For many of the artists, it has come at great cost: we can only be grateful and hope that as mental illnesses are better understood, that cost may be managed without sacrificing future greatness.

Artists and their Neuroses

January 8, 2010

Barbara Daniel

Sources

Bayes, Kathy, Alliance for the Mentally Ill, interview 8/29/09

Biological Basis of Creativity Linked to Mental Illness, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, September 2003 reported @ sciencedaily.com/releases/2003/10/1300.htm

Bipolar Disorder and the Creative Genius, HimaBindu K. Krishna, speech and blogged comments @ <http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/exchange/noder/1726> 2002

Casey, Nell, *Unholy Ghost: writers on depression*, Morrow, New York, 2001

Children of Bipolar Parents Score Higher on Creativity Test, Stanford Study Says, *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, November, 2005

Creativity and Mental Illness – do you have to be mad to be creative? Professor Raj Persaud, <http://www.gresham.ac.uk/printtranscript.asp?EventId=561>

Creativity in manic-depressives, cyclothymes, their normal relatives, and control subjects, *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, Richards, R., Kinney, K., Lunde, I., Benet, M., and Merzel, A, 1988

Fitzgerald, Michael, *The Genesis of Artistic Creation: Asperger's Syndrome and the Arts*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, 2005

Friedman Argues Imagination Key to America's Future, <http://www.northwestern.edu/newscenter/stories/2009/10/friedmanspeech.html>

Gregory, Richard L., *Oxford Companion to the Mind*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 1998

Jamison, Kay Redfield, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*, Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1993

Jamison, Kay Redfield, *An Unquiet Mind, A Memoir of Moods and Madness*, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, 1995

Kaufman, J.C. The Sylvia Plath Effect: Mental Illness in Eminent Creative Writers, *Journal of Creative Behavior*, 2001

Koestler, Arthur, The Three Domains of Creativity in The Concept of Creativity in Science and Art, Dennis Dutton and Michael Krausz, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, The Hague, 1981

Spivey, Nigel Jonathan, *How Art Made the World, how humans made art and art made us human*, Basic Books, New York, 2005

<http://www.uwsp.edu/Education/lwilson/creativ/CHARACTE.htm>