

Headstrong, Part II: The Creative Process

By Marian Salzman
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I wrote in my last post about my life-changing experience of being diagnosed with a brain tumor and having a craniotomy three years ago to remove it. I was incredibly lucky--my tumor, a meningioma, was in a place the surgeons could reach without disrupting other areas, it was basically benign (but atypical, which complicates matters) and I came through the surgery with 95 percent of my faculties intact, no obvious impairments and, in my triumphant Samson moment, all my recently styled and colored hair--but the experience definitely rocked my world. I see the world differently, and I have a new relationship with my brain.

I think more about all the brain functions I used to take for granted: handling "automatic" tasks such as walking, talking, reading. (Oliver Sacks' most recent *New Yorker* article, about people who suffer from alexia, or loss of the ability to recognize written language, puts the wondrousness and complexity of that last brain function into perspective.) But I've been especially focused on the brain's higher functions that aren't so black-and-white, such as memory and, especially, creativity.

People have been talking about the creative process for more than 100 years, but, fittingly, it remains mysterious and changeable. Artists and poets don't have sole proprietorship, though; innovation everywhere matters more than ever and the half-life of any idea is increasingly fleeting, so everyone needs to use their creative process daily. It's arguably job No. 1 for our brains these days. Anyone can do tactical; for me, being creative at work means sussing out the biggest idea. The last few weeks it was helping Yéle Haiti break through the news clutter and reignite interest in the massive numbers of people still suffering in Port-

au-Prince. But it all begins with an original take, looking at the world through my crooked lens to see a new way to make things work.

An article from the *Psychology Today* archives breaks the process into steps. First is preparation: seeking out potentially useful information, exploring new possibilities, daydreaming and letting your mind run loose. This is harder than it sounds, since we have to overcome self-censorship (that nasty voice in our heads that says, "That's a stupid idea") and our tendency to focus on obvious ("duh") solutions. Second is incubation, when you let all those inputs marinate, and let your unconscious mind take over. When you move a problem outside your fixed awareness, ideas bubble up. The next step is illumination, the aha! moment in your shower or on the treadmill. (Mine often happen when commuting on the Merritt Parkway, a curvy, scenic country road that I drive to get to the train station.) Last is translation, turning that flash of inspiration into something useful to yourself and others.

That's a lot of brain functions for something that happens largely subconsciously, outside of tasks we can will ourselves to do. ("Be creative" is one of my least favorite instructions to give or receive--don't we all choke under that pressure?) So many areas of the brain are involved, and it stands to reason that brain cells running amok like mine and growing into a tumor, or surgeons cutting into the brain to remove it, would have an effect on at least one of those processes. Even if there's no physiological change, the world-shaking experience would surely have an impact.

I'm fortunate that my brain trauma didn't really affect my creative process—or at least my output. The parts of my brain that handle creative functions weren't directly, physically involved. Then again, I haven't written a book since the surgery, though I did 15 books in 23 years before I went under the proverbial drill. Maybe it caused my idea bank to get deeply debited? But whether it was purely physical or partly psychological, my experience did influence the way I generate ideas and solve problems.

My journey changed my approach to creativity in many ways. Mainly, I've had to become more analytical, I think because patients make countless decisions, which can literally be life or death. Do I go through radiation afterward? (I didn't.) Do I stay on anti-seizure medication? (I did.) Do I return to work immediately after surgery—within three weeks—and fake energy, or take disability and risk becoming superfluous? (I went back and ended up reengaged... but deeply sick within a month.) The overwhelming stakes, and the distance I needed to create between myself and those consequences, led me to think in rational, objective terms. I dialed down the volume on my emotions and amped it up on anything I took to be a fact.

My situation also made me more open to collaboration within the creative process and more willing to hand over the reins when that's the best course of action. During my diagnosis and treatment, I became more dependent on others—and unbelievably calm. Once I chose a neurosurgeon, Dr. Fred Barker at Massachusetts General, I put it into his hands. I mean, I hop over to London at least once a quarter, but no part of me feels the need to get up and steer the Virgin or BA flights. In fact, I hit the seat, buckle up and fall sound asleep. Trusting Dr. Barker with my life was good training for letting go, becoming open and allowing others to guide me.

Before my surgery, my big hits might have been solo, but 2008 for me was about motivating others. When I was chief marketing officer at Porter Novelli, for instance, I led the creation of Jack + Bill, an award-winning agency initiative focused on 20-something trendsetters.

By working with other people, I realized I was also staying au courant. "Collaboration" has been the

watchword of the past decade: Think about Linux, Wikipedia and everything else open-source. Creativity used to be much more solitary; now we're eager to learn from anyone and everyone, to incorporate input from any source we can. When I have to solve a problem, I don't reference "experts" anymore as much as I look around—on Facebook, Twitter and other online communities.

Crowdsourcing was already a central part of my professional and personal life when my brain went haywire in 2007. But it took on new meaning when the problem I was trying to solve was my own health and wellness. I became addicted to bulletin boards and sought advice from all corners: Anyone else allergic to Dilantin? Suffer from sheer exhaustion and sleeplessness but crave the normalcy of work? How do I know when it's time to announce "I survived"? Another addictive tendency of mine is that I'm an interview junkie; I ask an extraordinary number of people, today mostly "followers," an insane number of questions.

It's part of my multitasking personality, which has also changed in the wake of everything happening in my head—and because of all the studies, scientific and otherwise, telling us that doing 20 things at once might not be such a good thing. More about that in my next post.