

The message of Zeev, the shoemaker

Yudit Kiss

Creation

The great Hungarian poet, Attila Jozsef took the words of a folk song as a motto for one of his books: "If you want to play the bagpipe, / you have to descend to hell/ It's there you have to learn/ how to play the bagpipe." ¹

In a letter addressed to his brother, Van Gogh wrote: " I can very well do without God both in my life and in my painting, but I cannot, ill as I am, do without something which is greater than I, which is my life – the power to create. (...) I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to convey by the actual radiance and vibration of our colouring." ²

György Kurtág says that "every note has to earn the right to be there" and the composer himself has to merit to be able to compose those notes. "What 'earning the thing' means is very simple: you die doing it or not". ³

Bettina Brentano, one of the few contemporaries who realised what an immense poet Hölderlin was, wrote about him: "I am sure that for Hölderlin, it was as if a heavenly power had flooded him with its currents; and the verb, in its violent precipitation on him, submerged and drowned his senses. And when the waters retreated, his senses were completely debilitated and the power of his spirit was subdued and annihilated."⁴

These outstanding artists are driven by a profound need to create, but during the process of creation they have to fight with their own demons, fears, anxieties and doubts. As if the tension between their own perceived limits and the weight of the universal message they are set to transmit made them suffer. As if the need to create were a natural force that has to break through them, sometimes tearing them into pieces, sometimes destroying them.

However, the painting, poem or music that finally emerges from this tortuous process, is a singular masterpiece of painful beauty.

There are other artists, for whom creation does not seem to be this kind of existential struggle. Listening to Bach or Mozart, looking at Rembrandt's paintings or reading Shakespeare, one has the impression that they just needed to touch the canvas or the paper and art flew out of them. As if they were the instrument through which the universe wanted to express itself.

Standing in front of a Rembrandt painting, one has the feeling of having multiplied senses that make possible to experience the world's astonishing richness; its lights, shadows, colours and textures; to understand every possible human gesture. Listening to Bach, one submerges into a river, feeling the deepest sufferings and most intense

¹ József Attila. *Medvetánc*. Révai Kiadás, Budapest, 1934.

² Bruce Bernard (Ed.) *Vincent by himself*, Guild Publishing, London, 1987. pp. 184-185.

³ György Kurtág, *Entretiens, textes, dessins*, Editions Contrechamps, Geneva, 2009. p.47.

⁴ Quoted in: <http://www.moncelon.com/holderlin.htm>

pleasures of people and the most ethereal heights of the skies. Reading Shakespeare one is intensely, fully alive and present in the world.

It is a particular blessing when creativity is combined with flow. The struggle of creation might not vanish, but a dimension of pleasure is added. Some forms of art seem to facilitate this combination. A theatre performance that leads to catharsis, a flow-feeling par excellence; dance that connects body, soul, melody and rhythm; music that leaves a large space for improvisation, from the Dâgar brothers to Theolonius Monk, for example, are particularly conducive to experience creative flow, both on the podium and in the ranks of the public.

The fundamental texts of our common human history, the epic of Gilgamesh, Odyssey, Mahabharata, Sundiata, Edda or Kalevala, seem to carry the traces of an ancient creative flow. We know that originally they were sang or recited accompanied by a musical instrument. Listening to them today we can still feel their inner pulsation, hear the sound of wind and waves, the sounds of nature, the matrix of all music and text. This ancient rhythm is like the pulse of the universe, a rhythm like the ones that regulate our body, made of the same material as the universe. Like every genuine work of art, these texts reconnect us with our origins, with ourselves and with our fellow humans.

Creativity

Creativity does not have to produce masterpieces of art. It can manifest itself in much more ephemeral forms as well. It can be an ad-hoc solution to an everyday problem, like how to balance two shopping bags and a pram with a screaming baby, it can be a moment of illumination, a sudden understanding of a scientific problem or a good joke. Humour is a genuinely creative reaction to life.

Creativity can appear in a simple gesture, in a movement of the hand, the manipulation of a material, an ingenious trick used by a craftsman to accomplish a task. The basic tools and everyday objects used by our ancestors are the physical embodiments of these creative gestures. Using a scythe, a boot-jack or a grandmother's darning egg, we reveal the little secrets of usage our ancestors stored in their objects and passed on to us. The basic gestures and devices of the traditional crafts and trades, from ironwork to pottery, from carpentry to apiculture, are humankind's living memory that transmit an immense knowledge and experience accumulated through generations.

The ways people have constructed their dwellings from huts to palaces was based on the observation of nature, a respectful and skilful use of its laws. Our ancient cities from Ur to Angkor Thom were not only meeting points and spiritual venues where people defined their place in their natural environment; they were also like three dimensional encyclopaedias that stored the awesome creativity, knowledge, beliefs, craftsmanship and technological experience of their builders. In the 15th century the Incas built Machu Picchu with a technique that protected it from earthquakes and landslides. 2400 meters above sea level, the city had a water management system that provided running water and a network of terraces where the inhabitants cultivated basic agricultural crops. There were sixteen public fountains designed to enjoy the

sight and sound of the water; they had stone recipients, carved to accommodate an aryballo, a round clay jug with a narrow neck the Incas used to store and transport goods. The city's main gate was positioned to provide a frame to a perfect view on the sacred peak of Huayna Picchu ...⁵

Observing nature, including one of its masterpieces, the human organism, one is at awe at its eternal variations, its infinite capacity to change and adapt. Through endless modifications, living organisms keep finding new ways of existing and adjusting to permanently changing conditions.

Humans do not have eternity to experiment and find solutions to their problems. In their limited time, with their limited capabilities they need to survive: to find a shelter, to feed themselves, to avoid dangers. They need to accelerate the solution-finding process. They need leaps forward. These leaps, these productive shortcuts are the moments of creativity. The combination of well-known elements in a new form for a new purpose or the creation of something completely new and different.

The day one of our ancestors looked at a stone, a piece of wood and an animal intestine and had the idea to combine them, he made an enormous leap forward that made life easier for himself and for his offspring. He created a tool that helped him to surpass his physical limitations, a tool to work - and to kill.

The same survival instinct is the inner drive of many manifestations of creativity that often flourish under precarious conditions today. Entering into a shantytown one discovers astonishing examples of people's ingenuity. They use what is available to them to improve their lives, from improvised shelters to sophisticated systems for stealing electricity, from sandals cut from used car tyres, to cubes made of recycled plastic bags that make it possible to walk on the unpaved paths during the rainy season.

In the time of the Cold War, we lived in a shortage economy in Hungary. This had many disadvantages, but some positive side effects as well. We were not flooded with items of consumption, so we often had to use our hands and mind to get what we needed. We had to become tinkers, menders, inventors and temporary craftsmen. Workers often had to fabricate their own tools or adapt machines for new functions. There was a Cocom list that forbade the export of "sensitive" – military-related - products to the Eastern bloc. Many engineers and workers had their best professional training by inventing substitutes for Western equipment or creating copies of it, similar to what Chinese engineers and workers do today, using a wide array of methods, from simple pirating to reverse engineering.

Pushed by the instinct of survival, creativity is not always constructive; quite the contrary. Mankind reached unsuspected summits in inventing ways of torture and destruction. In my field of research, the development of the arms industry, one can see new weapons and new ways of annihilation being invented by the day. Mankind in fact made a long way from the stone axe to the hydrogen bomb, from the finely

⁵ A Marvel of Inca Engineering. Interview with Ken Wright, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/ancient/wright-inca-engineering.html>; Jeff L. Brown, Water Supply and Drainage at Machu Picchu, <http://www.waterhistory.org/histories/machu/>.

ornamented swords of the samurais to unmanned drones that kill targets with a click on the computer keyboard.

Like our ancestors some thousand years ago, the masterminds behind the 9/11 attacks used an unusual combination of simple elements: a couple of cutters, some computers and some driving skills learnt on a short training course. This was sufficient to commit a mass murder that changed the course of world events in the early 21st century.

Flow

As creativity does not necessarily come with a state of flow, flow doesn't have to be necessarily creative. It can simply be a state of mind or rather a state of being, when one feels in tune with him/herself and the surrounding universe. It can be walking, talking with a friend, when ideas and emotions flow freely, gardening, listening to music or staring at the stars. It can be love, when one opens up for another person without limits and reservations, and the whole world fills up with happy tension.

In this state of "life-flow" one is carried by a powerful river and becomes part of it, without the fear of being swallowed. "Creative flow" is a more focused and active state; it is a positive drive towards a goal and often has a tangible result: an object, an idea, a solution to a problem or a performance. There is no hierarchy between the two forms; the feeling is the same, only its scope is different. "Life-flow" is usually experienced at an individual level and tends to remain there. It can eventually radiate over to others who are in the company of a person who has the gift of experiencing flow. Creative flow tends to have a result that can be shared with others.

In the state of flow one steps over the limits of her/his personality. This does not mean to become unconscious; quite the contrary. It means an elevated level of consciousness, in which the self is not burdened by everyday routine and problems - even though there must be a certain level of everyday stability to be able to abandon ourselves to such a voyage. The tuning off the everyday worries that absorb the bulk of our time in itself creates a sensation of liberation and openness, a receptivity towards "higher", more universal things. One feels becoming part of a larger unity - another person, an artistic, work or a spiritual community, nature - one feels more powerful and enriched.

Flow makes blossom our specific talent or inclination and in the process it connects us with the surrounding world in a particularly intense way. We follow our way, we feel we are doing what we are destined for, something that corresponds to our capacities, in harmony with our nature – with nature. We feel living up to our potentials, be it cooking a delicious meal, building a snow-man, solving a riddle or writing the Brothers Karamazov.

In a wonderful performance called *Autumn portraits*, puppet theatre artist Eric Bass tells the story of Zeev, the shoemaker. One late night Azrael, the Angel of Death, comes to fetch him. Zeev does not want to die, so he starts telling stories to Azrael. He tells him how he became a shoemaker. When he was a small boy, he was terribly bored at school, nothing interested him. But one day, walking on the street, he heard a pair of shoes singing to him. Nobody else heard that song but Zeev, and he

understood it right away. He became the best shoemaker of the shtetl. He remained poor, working day and night to feed his family, but he worked singing, because he liked what he was doing. You have to listen and hear what sings to you, said Zeev, the shoemaker and paused for a minute. You called me, Azrael, he said. Slowly, he put down the pair of little red shoes he has been fixing and nodded: All right then, let's go!

If one lives a full life, it is easier to say goodbye.

People who have experienced flow are likely to become more inspired, harmonious beings than the average. They might feel more at home in the world, appreciating it more, less inclined to destroy it. Having experienced the freedom of stepping over themselves, they might be more inclined to understand others.

However, there must be a flow-like feeling in destruction as well. At least this is what one learns reading about the fall of Troy, the barbarous acts of paramilitary forces in Columbia or the mass murder on the peaceful island of Utoya. Time, space, human considerations are switched off and destruction takes place in a targeted, efficient, concentrated action. Since flow is a positive feeling, I prefer to call this drive a trance of destruction. No wonder Homer told the fall of Troy by not telling it; the Iliad ends before the final attack and the Odyssey has only sporadic and indirect references to it.

We do have, however, a snapshot of what was going to come after Troy was taken, in the detailed description of Achilles' rampage in front of the city walls, some days before the end. In a destructive race, Achilles massacres every Trojan he comes across with and throws most of them into the river. He has no mercy, hears no plea; there is no human being able to stop him. Finally the river Scamander revolts against him:

"Stop, Achilles! (...) All my lovely rapids are crammed with corpses now,/ no channel in sight to sweep my currents out to sacred sea – /I'm choked with corpses and still you slaughter more,/ you blot out more! Leave me alone, have done –/ captain of armies, I'm filled with horror!"

Achilles does not even consider stopping. The outraged river raises from his bed and "charged against him, churning, surging, all his rapids rising in white fury (...) thrashing over Achilles' shoulders, raised a killer-wave - the tremendous thrust of it slammed against his shield / and he staggered, lost footing..."⁶

Achilles tries to stand and fight, but the river keeps cutting the ground under his feet and chases him around, determined to sweep him away. Panicked, the hero starts to run for his life, but he is taken over by the water, no matter how swift he is. He scrambles, tries to climb higher, but finds no refuge. Finally, out of breath, desperate, he cries out for help to the Gods, who intervene to save him.

Our times

I started to study the development of the arms industry when the Cold War came to an end. During the Cold War, in both political camps, enormous human and material

⁶ Homer, *The Iliad*, Trans. Robert Fagles, Penguin Classics, 1998. pp. 527-528.

resources were tied to defence: the best engineers, best skilled workers, best designers worked together in R&D and prototype production, lavishly financed by the state. They competed to invent a better tool to destroy more people, to create a nuclear bomb or send a man to space.

When the Cold War came to an end, many of us thought that the resources previously tied to the arms industry could be liberated and used to help to resolve mankind's pressing problems such as poverty, hunger or the exhaustion of natural resources. During a couple of feverish years, defense companies and state authorities in East Central Europe - and to a smaller extent in Western countries as well - searched for civilian alternatives to arms making. The excellent R&D teams now were busy to invent new products, from wheelchairs to sensors to monitor pollution levels, from machines to facilitate work in the fields and forests, to early warning systems to alert to natural disasters or regulate public transport. This genuine firework of creativity became extinguished in a few years. There was no money to produce the prototypes, no marketing skills to sell the new products, state backing dried up and companies did not have the resources to keep exploring new fields. By the late 1990s most companies went back to fabricating weapons and keep selling them to principally the poorest parts of the world ever since.

This experience clearly showed that external conditions have a major role in channelling creativity. It would be desirable to live in a world whose structures enhanced flow and where humans' infinite and inexhaustible creativity were used to make their life easier and happier.

However, we live in a world in which everything, including people's most intimate desires and dreams and their very lives have become a commodity. Driven by the fetish of growth, our economic systems are geared to produce more, to consume more and to waste more. The highest possible benefits should be generated in the shortest possible time. Life has a frenetic pace; time is accelerated and chopped up, every minute is destined for production or consumption. Those excluded from the system are treated as "inevitable waste"; usually living in poverty, focusing on sheer survival. There is massive unemployment and many of those who have work, have less and less job- and social security; employees have become interchangeable and disposable like machine parts. Social inequality and diminishing natural resources inevitably lead to wars and bloody conflicts.

The basic structures of everyday life have been distorted. A large majority of people live disconnected from nature, from each other, from themselves. A new, "synthetic" generation is growing up, for which reality is what they experience on TV, computers and video-games. One is connected, if one is attached to a screen.

Short-term financial interests weight over long-term survival interests, as the regularly shipwrecking world summits on climate change manifest. Instead of trying to mend the damage our unbridled material civilisation has caused to nature, there is a push to conquer new frontiers in the same destructive way. Large parts of the Amazonian forest, a unique reserve of biodiversity and one of the Earth's lungs are chopped down to produce crops for sale; forage that threatens delicate natural balances is promoted in the Arctic to extract more fuel.

The spending preferences of the world's dominant powers are well known. In 2008, when the present crisis started, the United States, the world's most powerful country, spent approximately \$660,9bn on defence (including the "Global War on Terror" and homeland security) and \$412bn on advertising and marketing. \$69,6bn, slightly more than 10% of the defence expenditure, was spent on education, the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Science Foundation.⁷ Since 2008 military budgets kept climbing, while money spent on human development - health, education, culture, welfare and environment - has been slashed further, due to the austerity packages imposed as crisis-resolving remedies.

Creativity became a catch-word in advertisements, a business tool, yet another product to sell. Creative activity became the privilege of those few who are not forced to a permanent and mechanic struggle for survival. Many of the most brilliant minds of our times are engaged by companies, investment funds and banks that use their creativity to invent new methods to maintain this system, instead of looking for solutions to treat the degradation of our natural environment or trying to find remedies for cancer, Aids, Alzheimer, let alone cure malaria or tuberculosis, still massively murderous illnesses we know how to treat...

Humankind is destroying itself and its environment, wasting its resources on a gigantic scale.

In this destructive trance we do not seem to notice the multiplying alarm signs. Bhopal, Chernobyl, New Orleans, Haiti were all major catastrophes where the combination of natural & man-induced disasters was particularly devastating. In March 2011, an earthquake, a tsunami and a nuclear disaster killed approximately 20,000 people, destroyed a whole region around Fukushima and caused massive nuclear pollution, whose impact can not even be assessed yet.

The waters came out of their bed "in white fury" and raised a "killer-wave"...

Following the scenario of the previous similar catastrophes, in the first shock news headlines announced the Apocalypse and for some weeks the world reacted with moving manifestations of solidarity and help. The failures of the corporate and political management that made possible to build a nuclear power plant on an earthquake and tsunami-prone territory and the disastrous handling of the disaster was severely criticised, with calls for radical changes. It was evident that if decision-makers listened to multiple expert warnings that pointed out the vulnerability of the site or to the message of the ancient inhabitants of the region, who set up stone markers to alert future generations not to build beyond a certain line approaching the sea, the losses could have been far smaller and the nature of the accident would have been different.

Some months later, however, business as usual resumed. Half a year after the catastrophe, the manifestation of the Fukushima victims who demanded compensation for their losses and efficient government action to rehabilitate the region, was just one

⁷ US Budget Fy2008, <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/usbudget/fy08/pdf/budget/tables.pdf> ; <http://www.intenseinfluence.com/blog/how-much-money-is-spent-on-advertising-per-year>; SIPRI Press release 11 April 2011, <http://www.sipri.org/media/pressreleases/2011/milex>

of the gloomy news of our crisis-stricken world. On the long run the Fukushima disaster might bring some energy policy changes both in Japan and world-wide, but similar catastrophes can not be avoided, if the core of the problem; the alliance of business and politics that overwrites basic human security considerations is not addressed.

Crises might become opportunities for change. Today's escalating economic and environmental crisis might be an occasion for introducing genuine changes in our social and economic systems, in the way we live. We should reconnect with creativity's genuine motives and use it to solve our fundamental, common problems that threaten our survival and the survival of the Earth.

The liberating, elevating flow Maya Angelou catches so beautifully in her poem, should not remain a utopia.⁸

"...We, this people, on this small and drifting planet
 Whose hands can strike with such abandon
 That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living
 Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness
 That the haughty neck is happy to bow
 And the proud back is glad to bend
 Out of such chaos, of such contradiction
 We learn that we are neither devils nor divines

When we come to it
 We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
 Created on this earth, of this earth
 Have the power to fashion for this earth
 A climate where every man and every woman
 Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
 Without crippling fear

When we come to it
 We must confess that we are the possible
 We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
 That is when, and only when
 We come to it. "

-o-

Published in: Georg Klein (Ed.) Nya tankar om kreativitet och flow (New thoughts on creativity and flow), Brombergs, 2012.

⁸ Maya Angelou: A brave and startling truth