CHAPTER 18

ALFONSO MONTUORI: CREATIVE INQUIRY AND DISCOVERING THE UNFORESEEN

Alfonso Montuori teaches creativity to doctoral students who are engaged in research and/or clinical work and, in addition, consults with artists and corporate executives about creativity and innovation. He envisions creativity as the center of professional and personal development around which everything else is organized. In his work as a consultant and administrator, his focus is on creating a context in which individuals can access their own creative process.

Self-Actualizing Creativity

Montuori's parents were both diplomats, his father Italian and his mother Dutch. The family lived in Beirut until Alfonso was five, after which they moved to Greece, where he attended an Italian elementary school, and then to London, where he attended high school and university. In his English private school, he was subjected to Latin, which he found intolerably boring. "I wondered why Latin had to be so dull and was told by the teacher that this was just the way it was. I had been very lucky in Greece, where my headmaster was a wizard who could turn topics that were extremely tedious into wonderful games and explorations, so I knew nothing *had* to be intrinsically boring. At that point, I realized my English

teacher was not talking about Latin at all but about himself, his way of seeing Latin, the world, and his own limitations. This increased my awareness that our understanding of the world can be constructed in many different ways, whether culturally or individually, and it was therefore possible to challenge what was taken as 'given' and create more generative, fun, and caring ways of being in the world."

After living in so many different cultures and being exposed to so many different ideas at an early age, Montuori began his lifelong quest for what he calls "creative inquiry," which he defines as the exploration of creativity and the creativity of exploration. Traditional education seemed to focus on "knowing" through the acquisition of information, theoretical frameworks, skills, and practices that provided answers and solutions. Unfortunately, in the process it devalued and often killed off precisely the "not knowing," the mystery that motivates us to be creative. Once we think we *know*, we cease real inquiry. Schooling tells us to learn what is already known and feed it back in one and only one way. We risk being boxed into frameworks that may provide us with answers, but can also become foundational givens and thus shut off the creation of alternatives and other ways of being in the world. As Montuori articulates it, "Creative inquiry does not reject traditional education and the value of knowing. But it also emphasizes that if we dig a little deeper, we see the immensity of not knowing, including all the 'Big Questions,' and even the things we think we do know are merely gallant creative constructions we use to make sense of a complex, fundamentally mysterious world. Creative inquiry is a frame that sees the world as a creative process, our understanding of the world as a creative process, and invites us to explore this creativity rather than accept what is given and immediately look for a solution or fix. Problem solving is necessary, of course, but not at the expense of opportunity finding!"

In graduate school, Montuori became particularly interested in the ways in which theoretical frames determined how topics were understood and approached. He saw, for instance, that the popular discourse about creativity emphasized *individual* initiative, often ignoring group, social, and cultural influences. After spending several years as a professional musician, Montuori was perplexed that in the mainstream discourse on creativity there was hardly any research on creative groups. He didn't find a single research article on a creative band, for instance.

He was intrigued by how creativity was framed in different disciplines. Whereas psychologists focused exclusively on the individual and ignored just about everything else, sociologists took a very different approach. For them, social factors were central, and the individual was just a vehicle for ideas that were "in the air." For example, sociologists have argued that Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace developed a theory of evolution at the same time, so the idea would ultimately have emerged regardless of who proposed it. Likewise, Sigmund Freud's theories were certainly novel and innovative, but if he had not published the ideas, then someone else would have come along and done so. Here were two very different perspectives on creativity, with very different emphases, different assumptions, and working almost entirely independently of each other. And clearly, psychology dominated the popular discourse of creativity, because in the popular imagination, creativity was entirely about the individual!

But Montuori's approach to creativity has been transdisciplinary, stressing what is relevant to the issue at hand, focusing on a constant creative interplay between theoretical frameworks and actual experience rather than on any form of theoretical or disciplinary purity. It has also focused on uncovering how different frameworks—which, after all, are themselves creations and the result of creative processes—construct their subject matter and shed light on it in different ways. In other words, how do we relate our

understanding of creativity, or of disciplinary or therapeutic orientations, to specific issues? And how do these frameworks in turn create both possibilities and constraints, illuminating one aspect of a subject while obscuring others?

Montuori also came to realize that the creative process is full of paradox, bringing together disparate items that are normally considered separate from one another. For instance, many people are so afraid that if they imitate their mentors, they will lose their own individual voice. "Yet," Montuori mentions, "Charlie Parker, one of the greatest innovators of jazz, learned all of Lester Young's solos by heart, and he certainly developed his own unique voice." Creativity involves imitation and novelty, tradition and innovation, rigor and imagination, head and heart, knowing and not knowing, learning and unlearning. This helped him to conceptualize graduate education and personal development as a process of *self-creation* that emerges when we see these polarities as sources of creativity rather than as mutually exclusive oppositions. "I don't think of education or therapy or coaching or consulting as separate—I see them all as a process of creative inquiry, an investigation of how we create our understanding of self and world, and how we can create alternatives."

Creative inquiry is not just about what you know. It is also about how you know what you know, who we are as inquirers, the choices we have made and can make, and who we can be. Our most fundamental choices become an opportunity for self-inquiry. Why does a person gravitate to one subject or research topic over another? Why is one road taken rather than another? Why choose this spouse or that town or this job or that philosophical or therapeutic orientation? And who is the student or clinician becoming during this process of inquiry? What and how and why are we creating?

"One of the things that always troubled me about the conventional attitude to creativity," Montuori explained, "is that there seemed to be an excessive focus on how to become more creative

by using tools like lateral thinking. But I don't think of creativity as this external thing that is generated by techniques; I think it's more useful to view it as the essential nature of who we are. The role of the educator or therapist or consultant then involves assisting individuals and organizations in unblocking all the various ways in which our natural creativity is prevented from flowing. And that is itself a creative process."

Creativity is often blocked by teachers and supervisors who focus on what you are doing wrong and admonishing you to avoid taking risks. Students and therapists start out eager and passionate about their work and then are forced to conform to established norms and rules that stifle any kind of innovation and make us lose touch with our passion. We are expected to reproduce what our teachers tell us to do rather than participating actively in the creation of new knowledge and practice. In this process, we take these norms and rules as the "right" way and lose touch with the fact that they are also creations and that other creative possibilities abound.

Montuori often hears people say that they just aren't very creative (we, too, have heard that a lot from a number of theorists we contacted for this project), but when he digs deeper into their assumptions about what that means, he hears a lot of self-limiting beliefs. "Some people confuse creativity with being artistic. I know a lot of very creative people who beat themselves up because they think they're not creative. In fact, they are creative leaders, organizers, academics, or therapists. They just don't think of their areas of expertise as being ones where creativity lives, and that's partly a function of the fact that our society has a very limited and distorted view of creativity. But when we mask our own creative contribution and feel we've *discovered* a theory or an approach rather than *invented* or created it, we also run the risk of thinking 'this is it!' and, paradoxically, can become very invested in our 'right' approach (because it's 'real'), therefore become ossified and closed to alternatives.

"I always find that asking people about creativity is fascinating—there are so many revealing assumptions that emerge almost immediately. Creativity offers a remarkable entry point into personal change, because what people tell us about creativity says a lot about who they are, how they view the process of creation and self-creation, where they create limitations and boundaries, and also where there may be opportunities for transformation. The process of creative inquiry itself can be transformative, as individuals begin to explore the way in which they have created themselves and their way of being in the world and begin to find alternatives."

Montuori has enjoyed asking people over the years who they consider to be creative role models. Baby boomers frequently name "eminent creatives" such as Einstein, Picasso, and Freud, but younger people tend to name "everyday creatives" such as friends and family members. While giving a lecture to a group of undergraduate art students at a major Midwestern university, he asked this question, and not one person mentioned a sculptor or painter. One student mentioned C. M. Punk, a World Wrestling Federation champion, after which the professor's face began to turn white, as if she were going to pass out. Another student mentioned his cousin, Fred, who could do amazing things in figuring out video games. Montuori sees this change in creative role models as further evidence we are evolving into a postmodern, MySpace world. But people of every generation have unexamined assumptions about creativity that can be unpacked in very revealing ways.

Many assumptions about creativity need to be deconstructed, that is, examined in such a way as to loosen their hold and open up a greater range of possibilities and choices. Montuori sees creativity as a process in which people create themselves, where the person is the creative product. "Creativity is really another way of saying that our experience of what we call reality is not given, but a creative construction. We co-create that 'reality' construction but are largely unaware of it. We are engaged in a creative process of reality con-

struction all the time, and so we might as well increase our range of choices and enjoy the process so as to live and act in the most aesthetic, caring, loving, funny, smart, and entertaining way possible."

Montuori likes to help students and professionals to focus on something that ordinarily they have framed as tedious and even insignificant. For researchers, this might mean reading and reviewing the existing literature to capture the essence of prior studies before developing their own project. One reason for their reluctance to undertake such a mundane task is the assumption that they are merely supposed to report what others have said. They often think of this as list making that is neither exciting nor engaging; it is just something that they are required to do in order to prove they know what others have done so they can justify what they really want to do themselves.

Montuori prefers to frame this process as the means by which you "situate yourself among your people. These are the people who, like you, care deeply about the subject you have chosen. Think of them as your ancestors. Some of them are long dead, and some may have even been killed for having an interest in or opinion about this subject. They are your colleagues, your people. One very bright student put it very nicely when she told me the literature review gave her the grounding that allowed her to explore her more unusual ideas. She felt she was freer to explore knowing she had a history and community of like-minded people she could draw on when she felt lost, anxious, or confused.

"Rather than writing a literature review as an 'outsider,' I ask my students to write it as a 'participant' in the community. And we mustn't forget that even though we may not be aware of it, we are deeply influenced by our predecessors. Situating ourselves in the literature is also a great way of uncovering our own implicit assumptions about our chosen field and how we approach it. Somebody who wants to be a therapist may never have read Freud, for instance, but you can be sure that when they talk about therapy,

they're drawing on a history of thought and using language and concepts whose origins they most likely don't know. Even though they don't think they are part of a larger history, it's important they understand that they are not blank slates, but deeply influenced by their cultural context that informs their assumptions about the field. And, of course, the fact that they want to be a therapist in the first place would not be possible if there had not been men and women who created the field and profession of 'therapist.'"

Montuori immediately gets his students to really participate in their new community. "I have my doctoral students write a publishable book review and submit it to a journal. Most get published, and before you know it, the community knows who they are, because you can bet your bottom dollar academics will read reviews of their work! So, at that point, they're not just doing some exercise for their teacher. Now they have an audience, and the audience will likely include the very people they're reading and writing about. This gives them a completely different attitude toward their work. They stop being 'students' and begin to see themselves as engaged in creative inquiry."

This is but one example of the ways that Montuori likes to make even the most mundane tasks come alive and spark creative engagement. Again, he is emphasizing breakthroughs as the result of a different frame that does not see creativity as something confined to a few individual geniuses or a few fleeting moments of insight, but as the very nature of who we are. "We normally think of creativity as a gift we receive once in a while if the muses are in the mood. But I believe creativity is there all the time, waiting for us to get out of our own way."

Improvisation

Montuori believes that asking yourself what you feel most passionate about is central to creativity. "Very often, it's only after a lot

of dialogue and a lot of trust building that students will confess what they *really* would like to do with their dissertation or with a particular client, but they 'know' that's not possible. And of course that's the breakthrough. It comes about because an environment has been created where the student feels it's okay to get in touch with and express her or his real (and sometimes long-forgotten) passion and challenge their assumptions about what is and is not possible and their often self-imposed limitations."

In his own life, Montuori didn't start to enjoy school until he was in graduate training. That is when he felt enough freedom to begin exploring his own interests and when he was allowed to do more than just regurgitate what he had learned before. Pluralism had always been a big theme in his life because he has lived in so many countries and attended so many different schools: It taught him to engage complexity and paradox as well as to appreciate what can emerge with patience and perseverance. Once he can get past the confusion, frustration, and fatigue, he often finds that he is able to break through to a different and unusual perspective. "Dealing with complex and ambiguous situations, there's a tendency to want premature closure, to get an answer, a solution, and get it over with. It's stressful not to know what's going on, not know what to do, and to stick with that not knowing. But you just have to stay with it, not give in to the need to be in control, allow for periods of not knowing, and navigate the turbulence for a while."

Being a professional musician earlier in life prepared Montuori for the demands of improvisation. He points out that the word *improvisation* can be traced back to the Latin *improvisus*, meaning "unforeseen," that which is not part of daily life, that which is not anticipated. Formal education prepared him only for preexisting situations, but it was improvisational jazz that helped him deal with the unexpected.

"In classical music," Montuori explained, "there's a score, and you play the notes, and it's all there—you can't deviate from what

has been written. Anything unforeseen is, by definition, wrong. In jazz, however, the unforeseen is actually embraced. Jazz is therefore sometimes called 'the sound of surprise.' The idea is to create something new and aesthetically satisfying in the context of an existing song, perhaps a standard like 'Our Love Is Here to Stay.' It's a very different view of the world: not a focus on absolute order, but rather on the continuous and delightful interplay of known and unknown, order and disorder. I think so much of the fundamentalism we see today is the result of a desperate desire to have a universal score, an absolute order that we can all stick to. But as Gregory Bateson said, 'Life is not like that.' In improvisation there is an ongoing process of navigating order and disorder, tradition and innovation, the song form and the new interpretations of that song, soloing and supporting soloists, but there's not a strict formula. That would be anathema! We explore and play together, not certain where exactly it will lead. And creativity is not just about great solos; it's also about being able to create a supportive context that makes the soloist sound good. A good accompaniment can make a soloist shine, but a bad, unsupportive accompaniment makes the whole thing crash. Rather than leading to total chaos, we are able to embrace and actually produce the unforeseen and also create a generative context where we can collaborate and create together. It's a process of collective self-creation, with the music as an emergent property."

As an administrator, Montuori does not want to control everything that's going on. If we want everything to be predictable, nothing new will ever emerge. He would rather open himself (and his organization) to the possibility of each person doing a solo, while ensuring that that everyone is playing the same song. There can be dissonance, counterpoint, rhythmic tension, but ultimately there must be individual and collaborative creativity and a dynamic relationship between predictability and innovation.

Creative Attitudes

In the practice of therapy, we can so easily slip into what is familiar rather than allowing ourselves to improvise in the moment, to create a new metaphor, intervention, or explanation that may not have ever been tried before. As enlightening and inspirational as the individuals and cases in this book may be, there is a tendency (especially for beginners) to think, "This is all very well that these famous therapists can do these amazingly innovative things, but they will never be within my grasp. I can learn them. I can apply them the way they did. But I'll never be that creative myself." Actually, nothing could be further from the truth: Each of us has the capacity to be more improvisational in what we do, inventing our own riffs that are variations of other themes. Rather than imposing preexisting melodies or structures, we can allow the music we make together to emerge through dialogue and inquiry.

Montuori has heard the complaint from beginners all the time that they are not geniuses and will never be a Milton Erickson, Virginia Satir, Fritz Perls, or Carl Whitaker, much less a poet like Sylvia Plath or Emily Dickinson, a painter like Georgia O'Keefe or Auguste Renoir, a musician like John Coltrane or Miles Davis, a writer like Ernest Hemingway or Virginia Woolf, or a performer like George Carlin or Chris Rock. Reading stories about creative breakthroughs is humbling and often discouraging and can lead to the conclusion that famous people are supernatural, or at least superhuman, acting in ways that are beyond the scope of mortal beings. Clearly, some people are born with extraordinary talent in certain areas. But we can *all* tap into our natural creativity.

Montuori suggests that along with a deconstruction of our limiting assumptions about creativity's who, what, where, and when, we can also engage in what he calls a "re-cognition" of the creativity and improvisation we engage in on a daily basis. "Many people I

talk with tell me that they're just not creative, and they certainly never improvise—in fact, they mostly don't even know what improvisation is. I have to remind them that the very conversation we're having is an improvisation on a theme called 'What is this thing called improvisation?' As they understand the nature and practice of improvisation, they become aware of what they're already doing and, reframing it, they begin to pay attention to pockets of freedom, open spaces they didn't see before. It's all about increasing the number of choices."