Women's Creativity:  
The State of Knowledge about the Creative Process—A Feminist Perspective  

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It may be that I have taken on too large an assignment here when I address myself to the issue of women's creativity, and the current state of knowledge about the creative process, from a feminist perspective. An hour from now you will be able to judge whether I have over-reached myself. This is my favorite subject. I am excited by it, and have been thinking, talking, arguing and mulling over the ideas and the evidence for most of my adult life. The area is so vast that it is impossible to do more than simply to point in several directions, set up some markers and directional signals for you, as it were, to enable you to continue the inquiry on your own. What I intend to share with you this morning comes from my discipline, which is human clinical neuropsychology, the study of brain-behavior relationships and from my passion, which is literature, art and the history of ideas.

I want to invite your attention to the following:

1. What do we know about sex differences in the human brain and what are the implications for creativity, as one of several brain functions that may be affected by anatomical differences?
2. What is creativity?
3. What do we know about sex differences in creative output, and how shall we account for them if they exist?
4. The idea of androgyny: that creativity is the expression of a harmonious integration of "feminine" and "masculine" brains.

Finally, I have collected for you a few examples from women's literature and art, from which I hope you will receive a sense of pride and encouragement, if not inspiration.

1. At a meeting of the International Neuropsychology Society in Toronto this February I attended a symposium on the intriguing subject: Sex differences in brain asymmetry. Here are a few of the latest startling findings by brain researchers; Female infants show a somewhat larger area of visual cortex in the right hemisphere than do male infants. This implies a possible anatomical basis for female advantage in nonverbal ideation (Wada, 1975). (As you know, we have two brains. Why do we have two brains? Why this apparent redundancy? The two cerebral hemispheres, virtually mirror mates in appearance, like two halves of a walnut, have in fact radically different functions. The left hemisphere is almost always—in 97% of cases—dominant for language, logical reasoning, mathematical calculation. The right hemisphere is non-verbal, mute, it knows but cannot tell what it knows without processing that knowledge through the left hemisphere; it processes spatial and visual abstractions, recognition of faces, a sense of one's body-image, music, and may be closer to intuitive or
pre-conscious processes in mental life, i.e. fantasy.) There is evidence that while brain asymmetry exists in infant brains of both sexes, the left asymmetry is more marked in the male, with greater integration of the two cerebral hemispheres in the female (Malfese, 1976). After either left or right hemisphere damage, females are less impaired than males, when impairment was measured by standardized tests such as the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, Screening for Aphasia, and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. In reporting her findings, McGlone said, "the greater the complexity of the task, the greater were the sex differences, favoring the females." She concluded that males were more vulnerable to damage when insults to the brain were comparable. Of great interest was her observation that "women use verbal strategies to solve spatial problems" because it suggests a more fluid interplay between the separate functions of the right and left brains. It may be that language is localized differently for females than for males, with males more focal and females more diffused in localization of function. Bryden found that with dichotic listening, females were less lateralized than males, and that males did better on three-dimensional spatial visualization, and furthermore that males used different strategies such as rotation of the figure, while females used verbal-analytical strategies. While these findings are not conclusive, they offer a rich field for study because, unlike many of the other reported studies of sex differences, they are based on anatomical and direct brain-behavior relationships as measured by objective and standardized tests, and are less open to the suspicion of being cultural artifacts.

Those of you who remember the argument of Ashley Montagu in his book The Natural Superiority of Women, which he wrote from the viewpoint of evolutionary biology, will be reminded of his position. But our interest here is somewhat different: if there are anatomical sex differences in the human brain, what is the significance of that fact for our understanding of creativity? and, especially, of women's creativity? I don't know, and neither does anyone else, but this will be an important field for research in the future. It is going on vigorously, right now.

2. What is creativity and what are the conditions of its cultivation? Let us extinguish between pseudo forms of creativity, that which is merely decorative, the "frosting" to life, a relatively superficial experience, and true creativity which is the process of bringing something new and valuable to birth. Early Plato put his poets and artists on the sixth circle of reality because he said they dealt only with appearances and not with reality itself; but in his later work, the beautiful Symposium, he describes true artists, namely those who bring into birth some new reality.

Carl Rogers describes the creative process as novel, unique, growing out of an openness to experience and an internal locus of evaluation. This internal locus of evaluation is of immense importance to women. As long as we permit ourselves to be evaluated externally (by males, defined by their needs, as we have for so many eons) our creative energies risk being stifled and stillborn. Maslow's study of creative people found that they were more spontaneous and expressive, less controlled and inhibited in their behavior, able to flow out more easily and with less blocking and self-criticism. They showed a humor, and a tendency to do anything creatively, such as teaching or child-rearing; they expressed ideas and impulses without fear of ridicule from others—an essential aspect of self-actualizing creativeness.
An educational process, then, which over-controls and which obstructs our access to the unconscious or preconscious life, kills creativity. If girls are socialized to passivity and docility as essential traits of femininity, a tragic waste of creative power is almost ensured. The stultifying effect of such socialization has been described by Marion Milner in her book On Not Being Able to Paint.

Harold Anderson has reminded us of another kind of creativity, not one that results in a product, an object, but a kind of psychological or social creativity, whose product is a process. This is creativity not with objects but with persons: creativity in human relationships. This kind of creativity requires intelligence, sharp perceptions, subtle sensitivities, respect for the individual person, and a personal boldness to stand up for one's own point of view and one's convictions. Creativity in human relations requires individual integrity; civilization depends upon an abundance of such persons. In this sense, creativity is seen as personality development.

Providing a cross-cultural perspective on the question of creativity, Margaret Mead has stressed the importance of the supportive social context. In any society, which individuals have an opportunity to experience creativity? There are contexts in which an individual may be creative but because this creativity is unrecognized, unnamed and unrewarded, the experience is missing. (One need not travel to preliterate societies, need one, to discover such unnurturing environments for women? We have all known them to some extent.) Mead points out that unused talents are destructive of the mental health of every individual in the society. The waste of frustrated or denied creativity leads, she comments, to deterioration of the entire fabric of society. Citing Shakespeare's sonnet, she agrees that "Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds."

Continuing a review of the field of psychological research, Frank Barron, studying creative architects, writers and composers found that they preferred complexity, even disorderliness, to the simple or obvious in form, and disliked conformity. Getzels and Jackson in comparing children with high IQ's with those who scored high on tests of creativity, found that teachers much preferred the high IQ kids: the creative kids were too troublesome, hard to manage, and always into something, and didn't care so much about pleasing the teacher. (Margaret Mead says the trouble with our schools is that they're planned for "nice little girls who want to help the teacher pass out pencils.")

The tests devised by Paul Torrance to measure creativity in school children stress ideophoria, the freedom and fluidity with which ideas pour forth, and imagination at work within only those constraints which are self-imposed.

Rollo May, in his latest book The Courage to Create, has focused the issue most meaningfully for me. "We are living at a time" he writes, "when one age is dying and the new age is not yet born." The courage required is the existential courage of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Camus and Sartre—not the absence of despair "but the capacity to move ahead in spite of despair." He asks why creativity is so difficult and why it requires so much courage. It is an active battle with the gods, he says, it provokes the jealousy of the gods, it threatens the status quo, whenever an authentic act of the creative spirit occurs. Degas said, "A painter paints a picture with the same feeling as that with which a criminal commits a crime." Picasso said, "every
act of construction is first of all an act of destruction." The creative act is destructive as well as constructive, and always carries with it an inexplicable feeling of guilt. Any breakthrough of a significant idea in science or a new form in art will destroy what many people believe is essential to their world. But both creativity and consciousness are born in rebellion, in defying mortality, in yearning for immortality, born in rage, ending in the enlargement of human consciousness.

Woman has always been deeply identified with this act of courageous disobedience. Remember! it was Eve who said the first NO to God, thereby ushering in the human era and the human predicament with its knowledge of good and evil. The courage to say NO, the courage to commit disobedience, and the courage to create are inextricably linked. While modern woman has been taught that "femininity" meant submissiveness, it was not always thus, and it will not be always so!

3. As we move into psychoanalytic definitions of creativity, the issue of sex differences appears immediately, since for Freud, anatomy was destiny, and creativity was "nothing but" sublimation of the libido, and women's creativity was designed to be fulfilled through her biological reproductive function. Other ambitions on the part of women were the result of "masculine protest" based on penis envy. We reject Freud's simplistic reductionism, but let us give Freud his due: when he asked his famous question "Was will das Weib?" (What do women want?) he was confessing his bewilderment and ignorance—a remarkable expression of humility (which was not one of Freud's noticeable virtues). He expected that later women analysts would do the essential work on the psychology of women, and indeed they have done so. Such powerful analytic thinkers as Helene Deutch, Therese Benedek, Karen Horney, Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, to name a few, have taken psychoanalytic thought far from its Freudian roots, and of these I contend most heartily to you the wonderful woman Karen Horney because of the courage, boldness and originality with which she corrected Freud's defects of male myopia, prejudice and ignorance. She pointed out the archaic nature of man's fear of woman, the oppression of women which resulted from men's envy of the life-creating power of woman. Womb envy led men to over-compensation efforts toward achievement, in her view. A quotation from Horney will illustrate the light-years that separate her understanding from that of Freud:

"Mother goddesses are earthy goddesses, fertile like the soil. They bring forth new life and they nurture it. It was this life-creating power of woman, an elemental force, that filled men with admiration. And this is exactly the point at which problems arise. For it is contrary to human nature to sustain appreciation without resentment toward capabilities that one does not possess." Man's achievements in state, religion, art and science, bearing the masculine imprint, of which he is so proud, "cannot fully make up for something for which he is not endowed by nature. Thus there has remained an obvious residue of general resentment of men against women." She goes on to describe the era of matriarchy which existed before the establishment of the cultural supremacy of the male, "when law and custom were centered around the mother, when matricide was (as Sophocles showed in the Fumenides) the unforgivable crime, while patricide by comparison was a minor offense." So Horney finds "the principal root of the masculine impulse toward creative work in the never-ending conflict between the man's longing for the woman and his dread of her."
This simply turns Freud upside down, right? I think this is a rewarding line of argument, but we must look for explanations of creativity that include both male and female psychology—in fact, for a reconciliation of opposing tendencies in the sexes. More on this later.

If we reject the Freudian explanation for the lack of great creative works by women, equaling the greatest productions of males, how shall we account for the evidence of recorded history? Consider the situation of Anais Nin, as she is finishing her analysis with Otto Rank, and he says to her, "You may discover now what you want—to be a woman or an artist." Rank believed that women when cured of neurosis entered life, where Man enters Art. Nin recorded the following in her diary:

"I had an evening of hysteria. A choice between standing in the middle of the room and breaking out into hysterical weeping, or writing. I felt that I would break out in some wild disruptive fit of blind, furious rebellion against my life, against the domination of man, my desire for a free artist life, my fear of not being physically strong enough for it, my desire to run amuck and my distrust of my judgment of people, of my trusts and faiths, of my impulses. A fear of the wildness of my fever and despair, of the excessiveness of my melancholy. Then I sat at my typewriter, saying to myself, "Write, you neurotic, you weakling, you; rebellion is a negative form of living. Write!" Nin had already come to the conclusion that woman has had to conceal her real self in order to survive; but now she found that her true survival could only rest on full self-assertion. She gave herself the task of self-definition in literary terms as Karen Horney had done in psychological terms, and wrote: "I see a whole cycle of creation closing upon woman, the study of woman. I see all the roads of philosophy, the history of art, morphology, psychology, all converging to clear up the mystery of woman." While it may appear to us that Nin saved or created herself, she nevertheless gave credit to her psychoanalysis which she said "allowed the birth of the real me, a most dangerous and painful one for a woman, filled with dangers; for no one has ever loved an adventurous woman as they have loved adventurous men… I may not become a saint, but I am very full and rich."

Tillie Olsen is another writer who has described out of her deep personal experience the distractions and pressures that keep a woman writer from her work. In Silences: When Writers Don't Write she tells how she lived the "triple life" of mothering and housewifery, working full-time as a transcriber and secretary, and trying to be a writer…"on the bus going back and forth to work and in the deep night hours for as long as I could stay awake, after the kids were in bed, after the household tasks were done." Her first published work began "I stand here ironing…” She was a success. She reminds us to affirm the women writers who must hold a job, rear children, cannot afford household help, …the ones who bear the terrible burden of the writer's unnatural silences.

A painter writes a book on not being able to paint. A writer writes a book on Silences—when writers don't write.

I must confess to you that these testimonies to the struggle, the impasse, strike a responsive chord of pity and recognition in me, and perhaps they do for some of you. Tilly Olsen is right when she remarks that “Any woman who writes is a survivor.”
A very different argument has been made by some that women have in actuality not been less inventive than men, but that their records have been obliterated so that the credit for their work has gone to the men with whom they collaborated. Without belaboring this point, let me just suggest a few examples that come readily to mind. A reader of *Science* will have noticed that:

1. Crick, Watson and Wilkins received the Nobel Prize for the work on the double helix (the discovery of the DNA molecule) which was made possible by their associate, Rosalind Franklin, whom they deprecated and ridiculed.

2. An English radioastronomer, Jocelyn Bell Burnell, discovered the celestial objects known as pulsating radio stars, or pulsars—a discovery which won the Nobel Prize for her professor and associate, Ryles and Hewish. (Thus, the essential role of women scientists in the two most dramatic scientific events of the last decade—the cracking of the genetic code and the discovery of pulsars, has been obscured.)

3. The archives and annals of psychology are replete with such instances. Christiana Morgan was the senior author of Morgan and Murray's *Thematic Apperception Test*. The TAT is now universally attributed to Henry Murray, and no one would wish to depreciate the enormous contributions to psychology of this esteemed humanist and scholar but the fact remains that he was the JUNIOR author of that work. Psychology provides numerous examples of rape of the scientific and intellectual work of women graduate students by their male professors. Anyone who wants to read it can find the evidence in *The American Psychologist*. The lost women of history and science are being reclaimed. The record will be set straight—partially. To make that statement reminds us that the greatest accomplishments, those of prehistory, the discovery of agriculture, weaving, ceramics, which made human culture a possibility, will forever be shrouded in doubt and controversy: men will never accept that it was woman that enabled our species to enter civilization.

Obviously, the question will not be settled for a long time. Let us be about freeing ourselves and our powers. Let us not waste any more of our time on trying to decipher what may be only a riddle.

Women today are re-assessing the meaning of their lives. We are taking a second look at what we have been about, we have been rejecting the male-defined "shadow" personalities that have been impressed upon us.

As Lillian Hellman says in her preface to *Pentimento*, we now want to "see and then see again." I quote from Hellman, "Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. When that happens it is possible, in some pictures, to see the original lines: a tree will show through a woman's dress, a child makes way for a dog, a large boat is no longer on an open sea. That is called pentimento because the painter 'repented,' changed his mind. Perhaps it would be as well to say that the old conception, replaced by a later choice, is a way of seeing and then seeing again… The paint has aged now and I wanted to see what was there for me once, what is there for me now."
Do you remember Elizabeth Barret Browning's plea?

Deal with us nobly, women though we be
And honor us with truth if not with praise.

(I'm going to deal out both truth and praise.)

Katherine Anne Porter, immersed in the 19th century novel, published her first story when she was thirty. Before that she destroyed masses of manuscripts because they did not satisfy her high standards. In her many rich psychological studies of women she has produced some of the finest short stories in the English language. She gave credit to her family, in these words: "I think it's something in the blood. We've always had great letter-writers, readers, great story-tellers in our family. I've listened all my life to articulate people. Every story had shape and meaning and point." In 1973 at the age of 79 she spoke at the Poetry Center in New York City on the topic, "Life, Love and Literature." Her advice to her audience was "Find out what you're good for, and then do that."

4. The Idea of Androgyny. Virginia Woolf taught us the importance of a life support system (as Margaret Mead has in another context) in her famous essay "A Room of One's Own." With Woolf, we come at last to a possibility of a reconciliation between the warring aspects of our natures, and the theme of what I want to communicate with you today—the androgynous vision. Woolf saw plainly that history contained the names of so few women because of economic and social circumstances. "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction," she wrote. Woolf was convinced that women perceived other levels of reality, other roads of approach than verbal logic, that women had access to something beyond truth as defined by what men generally meant by truth. She said, "if verbal logic gets in the way of kindness or vision, it has to be given up; the human values are worth more than the purely intellectual." One may or may not agree with Woolf, but the connection between the current studies of the right and left hemispheres of the brain, as two distinct ways of knowing and of being, is too poignant to ignore. Virginia Woolf saw as the highest aim of the feminist movement the effort to prepare the way for a profound change in relationships between the sexes and a profound adjustment of the inner lives of both sexes. She sought a marriage of the masculine and feminine principles within the mind of each individual. She identified with Antigone, who discriminated between laws and The Law. Antigone is our primer of resistance to masculine tyranny. She was convinced that the minds of women differed radically from the minds of men, but women had not yet had an opportunity to become themselves. Women had been "under the shadow of the rock these million years" and were only now timidly crawling into the light. Perhaps, like Anais Nin, it is her contribution to reveal the essential quality of female experience where it differs from the male. Woolf was a highly intellectual writer, but she despised the over-cultivation of the intellect which she saw in the world around her, saw it as drying up the soul, and fought against it. She held out for us the hope of a golden mean, an integrated personality in which thought and feeling, logic and intuition, are harmoniously combined. The clear light of her vision is exquisite. These are universal ideas.
To complete my presentation to you, I want to show you a dozen slides, representing the work of American women artists. They are copied from the NOW calendar for 1976 which introduced them with these words: "Art is a window, a way of sharing. Though overlooked for centuries, women artists are very much a part of the country's and the world's art heritage."

1. Fourth of July Picnic. Susan Merrett (1845)
This is Folk art. It would be called collage today. The tiny figures are actually cutouts, painted separately and painstakingly pasted onto a watercolor background. Colonial and post-revolutionary women used whatever techniques they wished: oils, water colors, calligraphy, embroidery, painting on glass.

2. The Toilette. Mary Cassatt, (1891)
America's foremost woman painter entered the male-dominated art world of the Paris impressionists, earning their respect. In this vigorous, unsentimental work she has used a method of drypoint etching and aquatint, a difficult process which she invented.

3. String of Beads. Margaretta Hinchman (1903)
Little is known of this accomplished artist. She lived in Pennsylvania and Connecticut. She did oils, watercolors, sculptures, lithography, and illustrated books and magazines. We do not know the date of her birth. She died in 1955.

Matthews is a watercolorist identified with the California decorative school around the turn of the century. The orange motif in the frame is carved in low relief and painted in perfect harmony with the watercolor of the little girl under an orange tree. Matthews also created floral decorations on furniture that she and her husband produced and sold in their "Furniture Shop."

5. Peach and Glass. Georgia O'Keefe (1927)
This great painter is alive at age 89 and working in the austere landscape of New Mexico. Her ability to simplify objects to their essence is extraordinary; a commonplace object from nature is transformed into a uniquely personal expression. She began painting in 1916 with the encouragement of Alfred Stieglitz, the photographer, who was later her husband. Recalling the days at the Stieglitz studio, O'Keefe said, "At first the men didn't want me around. They couldn't take a woman artist seriously. I would listen to them talk and I thought, my they are dreamy. I felt much more prosaic, and I knew I could paint as well as some of them." And she did, in spite of being saddled with much of the mundane work around the studio.

The following slides present work done in the 1960's and the 1970's.

This artist works in the San Francisco Bay area. She says "My paintings are peepholes into my way of seeing and being."

"This painting is a fleeting dream of a distant planet where suns must be captured to keep the alien world alive. The sun is struggling to escape as the jungle strains to hold it." Wornum, in addition to her own work, teaches art to delinquent girls.


The projected slide cannot capture the intense images of this assemblage, drawn from the vocabulary of the unconscious of the artist. Saar has developed through many periods, through preoccupations with the mystical, the erotic, the occult. "My work is not for lazy minds or for those who want everything spelled out for them," says Saar. "There is something in me that wants out and art is the vehicle." She uses boxes to contain artifacts that reflect historical or personal mementoes of the black folk culture: found objects, discards, organic objects such as shells, feathers and bones.


"My paintings aren't about art issues. They're about a feeling that comes to me from the outside, from landscapes." She does not paint directly from nature. "I would rather leave nature to itself," she wrote, "it is quite beautiful enough as it is. I do not want to improve it. I could certainly never mirror it. I would like more to paint what it leaves me with."


"One of the most significant artists of the 50's and 60's. Frankenthaler changed the look of painting. This one is acrylic on canvas. The kind of space, image and structure Frankenthaler creates depends on the way she works—almost exclusively on the floor, looking down on an image when she paints it. The viewer has the sensation of being immersed in the water or in the sky of her painting."


This outstanding American painter was paralyzed since 1959 when she contracted polio while working on the Greek island of Mykonos. "The gradual evolution of her art away from purist abstraction toward a direct perception of nature was a personal and artistic liberation…impelled by a growing need for spontaneous expression with emphasis on light and color."


For ten years Jane Wilson painted rural landscapes from memory of her Iowa childhood, while she was living in New York. A period of cityscapes followed and she has now entered into a period of painting still lifes, imposing order on masses of details, creating an impression of a fortuitous moment and a sense of immediacy, without any deliberate arrangement of objects or use of elaborate props.
As we have considered the creative process, working through the consciousness of women, the feminist "window," we have covered a wide range of ideas and some exotic ground. Let me try to summarize or distill what I hope to leave with you.

The task is not to try to be exactly like men.

The task is not to try to be entirely different from men.

The task is to be *ourselves*, and to walk courageously toward whatever possibilities and new vistas that may open for us.

It is quite possible that women's creativity when fully unleashed will produce a humanized, more harmonious civilization.

It is possible that the androgynous vision of Virginia Woolf will become a reality, moving us away from sexual polarization and the prison of gender toward a world where roles and ways of behaving can be freely chosen.

For, in the perspective of some, our species is doomed *unless* we move toward the androgynous ideal—the synthesis of opposites: active/passive; male/female; Yin/Yang; rational/intuitive; left hemisphere/right hemisphere; in an elegant and truly human balance.

In Virginia Woolf's words:

"Peace and freedom can only exist in an androgynous society."

Take courage, women! The best is yet to come. We've only begun to realize our strength and the power of our vision. The total flowering of women's immense creative powers awaits us—and our daughters—in the future.