



**THE MIND OF AN  
INNOVATOR**  
A GUIDE TO SEEING  
POSSIBILITIES WHERE  
NONE EXISTED  
BEFORE

**PATRICIA HARMON, PH.D.**

# **The Mind of an Innovator**



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Patricia Harmon, Ph.D.



**Strategic Book Publishing**

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Any resemblance of any of the characters appearing in this novel to living persons is purely coincidental.

To my mother, whose selfless love and strength always shine through.



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Glance at the sun.  
See the moon and the stars.  
Gaze at the beauty of earth's greenings.  
Now, think.

- Hildegard Von Bingen

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# *Preface*

It was nine o'clock in the morning and I was about to lead a session on creative thinking with a large group of medical professionals. As I scanned the audience, waiting for the host to approach the podium and announce me, I overheard one of the participating physicians lean over to a colleague with evident disdain, and say "I guess you can make a cottage industry out of anything these days."

There was a time when that was the sort of comment unnerved me. Had I been a participant, I might even have said something similar if I didn't know anything about the topic. But instead, I smiled to myself with the knowledge that his attitude would change, just as mine had, as we went through the thinking techniques in the hands-on seminar.

I looked forward to witnessing his transformation, and I wasn't disappointed. His mocking tone and sarcastic comments were soon replaced by a near child-like wonder at the unexpected ideas he was developing. All it took was some concentrated effort and a little patience with learning some new thinking techniques.

Whenever people ask me what I do for a living, I tell them creative thinking and innovation, and then get ready for the pause. They often respond with "That's interesting", which is really just rhetoric for covering their skepticism. Seldom do they ask follow-up questions because people often misunderstand it as something undisciplined, unscientific or downright useless. Innovation is easily grasped, of course, but it's the creative thinking that throws people off.

If you had told me that I would be working in the field of creative thinking and innovation some day, I never would have believed it. I was an ambitious business school graduate, who took pride in my analytical

thinking ability. Creative thinking was the responsibility of those graphic artist folks that I would be hiring some day.

In the way that life twists and turns, a confluence of events led me to attending a course on creative thinking more than fifteen years ago. And I confess that the only reason I attended was that someone else was paying for it and I was in need of a change of pace.

With barely a sliver of curiosity, I figured that the experience would at least have some entertainment value. Instead, it ended up changing the course of my life.

The techniques I learned helped me develop an ever-present curiosity about life and learning. They empowered me to re-frame my perspective, not because there was something wrong in the way I saw things, but because it was very limited. Possibilities began to appear where I had seen none before. I experienced a growing realization that what stopped me from seeing those possibilities, were not only the skills to think creatively, but also the boundaries that we take as truths. It was disconcerting, yet at the same time unbelievably liberating.

This book is as much about self-belief as it is about creative thinking and innovation. It is about recognizing that oftentimes, unwittingly, we are made aware of our limitations while seldom encouraged to test our boundaries or change our thinking. It is the difference between the optimist describing the glass as half full, the pessimist describing it as half empty, and the innovator saying that the glass needs re-sizing.

Ultimately, this book is about reclaiming your enthusiasm and the aliveness that accompanies novelty of thought, that characteristic that either lies in the shadow or blossoms, depending upon your life experiences and opportunities.

As a teacher at heart, I become energized when I share my learning with others and witness their surprise and delight when they find

themselves thinking in ways that they never did before. It is in this spirit that I bring forth my learning to you and as you ponder the pages herein, I welcome you to share yours with me.



# *Introduction*

She stood in the middle of the Capilano Suspension Bridge, teetering on 450 feet of swaying, wobbly, wooden slats 230 feet above rocks and fast-moving rapids in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Clipboard in hand, she waited for young men to cross. And cross they did, holding on as tightly as they could.

It was certainly not a task for the faint of heart. She did this regularly over the course of a few weeks, waiting only for young men unaccompanied by women. She approached 85 men in all, telling them that she was doing research in beautiful places. She asked them a series of questions, then gave them her phone number and told them they could call if they had any follow-up questions.

If her purpose was simply to meet men, it certainly was a creative and persistent way to go about it. But that wasn't her goal; the work was part of an experiment to study attraction between the sexes. The other part of the study was a similar scenario repeated upriver by the same woman, but this time on a wide, sturdy bridge only 10 feet above a small rivulet.

What the experiment measured was the men's perceptions of the woman's attractiveness. Of the men who crossed the high, frightening bridge, about 50 percent made a follow-up call to her; of those crossing the lower one, only 12 percent did.

Scientists have known for years that attraction is likely to happen when people are aroused,<sup>1</sup> be it through laughter, anxiety or fear. Fear had gotten the attention of these men and alerted their brains' emotional

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1 Schachter, S. & Singer, J. E. "Cognitive, Social, and Physiological Determinants of Emotional State." *Psychological Review*, 69(5) (1962); 379-399

centers. The men then attributed that arousal to the woman's presence, not to the real cause: fear.

People misattribute their feelings all the time, for a host of reasons. Unless we deem something as significant, we often just don't pay much attention to it. This is actually an example of how efficiently the brain works. It would be too taxing to pay attention to everything all the time, so we focus on the important things.

Emotions take hold of us and cause us to see the world differently. We promise to lose weight, but give in to the temptation of that chocolate dessert. We vow to save money, but that new car or outfit becomes irresistible. We promise to clean the basement, yet somehow there is always something else that we end up doing. Call it procrastination, getting sidetracked, or the need for immediate gratification, but whatever it is, we don't think too much about it.

Seldom do we think about how we think, or why we feel as we do. But being aware of both will help us understand what drives our behavior. When it comes to innovation, it is critically important to know those drivers, because that is how we develop a mindset primed for creative thinking. By simply changing your mood to a more positive one, you can broaden your view to see more possibilities and find ideas that are qualitatively richer and greater in number, even without using any thinking techniques to go further.

A serious mood will sharpen your focus to apply your analytical skills. This point is little understood, but crucially important: your mood crosses over to your thoughts so that what you feel determines how much you actually see, and one of the best ways to improve your creative thinking is to see as much as possible. This foundation must be in place before you can fully employ the creative skills necessary for thinking outside the box.

There are many paths to innovation, and this book will uncover numerous ones that are highly effective. My purpose in writing this book is to show you that creative thinking is not the sole domain of visionaries or those folks who simply march to the beat of a different drum. Creative thinking is a set of skills that can be learned and developed, and that go hand in hand with an attitude of curiosity. We are born with a curiosity that propels us to constantly ask “why?” as we interact with our environment. We start out seeing the world with fresh eyes, but as time passes, our increasing knowledge quells our inborn curiosity, and we begin to learn our limitations.

We learn the skill of logic, which is both our friend and our nemesis. It is our friend because it helps us make decisions, and yet it is our nemesis because it prematurely filters our thinking. Seeds of ideas exist everywhere, but to recognize them we need to ignore the ability to recognize them requires holding back the judgment of spoken by common sense. They are only seeds because they are not fully functioning ideas. They need growth, refinement, and development.

This is perhaps one of the most under-estimated, misunderstood concepts of creative thinking, particularly in the corporate world today. Seeds of ideas exist everywhere, but to recognize them we need to hold back the judgment dictated by common sense. When seeds and whole ideas are lumped together, some end up being quickly dismissed because they do not pass the criteria of logic and reason. We rush too hastily to judgment.

The essence of creative thinking is holding your mind open long enough to entertain those possibilities of thinking you normally would not. These are the seeds of ideas that are not logical, cost-effective or strategically aligned.

Imagine the spectrum of creative thinking as a line. At the left side is an idea that is mundane, but logical and doable. By continually making improvements you can develop it into something better.

Moving along the continuum, for example, you can increase the number of flavors to a cereal, add new shapes to a product's packaging, and build efficiency by streamlining processes. These are examples of the continuous improvement initiative spawned by Dr. W. Edwards Deming, known as the father of the Japanese post-war industrial revival. He helped Japanese manufacturers shift from making cheap imitations to making innovative, high-quality products at the end of World War II by making continual improvements.

Japan, of course, is now regarded as a world leader in quality goods. That is a necessary part of remaining competitive. But it's not the end of the story: Japan's competitors also develop high-quality goods. And your competitors, too, are developing quality; top quality is now commoditized and is now the entry ticket to the competitive playing field. Quality is expected.

The question, then, is how do you differentiate yourselves from your competitors to gain a sustainable competitive advantage? In a word: creativity.

This is where the other side of the creativity spectrum comes into focus. Instead of starting small inside and building out, we start outside and come back in. We start with the illogical, unfinished ideas outside the box of reason, and mine them for seeds of ideas.

Be aware that it's not easy. Judgment sits in wait, ready to pounce like a lion on its prey. Entertaining illogical thoughts puts us into a zone of discomfort that builds tension as we try to make sense of those thoughts. It's usually a relief when we are snapped back to reason.

But this book will give you techniques to overcome that discomfort and erase the tension, thereby allowing you to think freely and creatively.

In Part One, chapters 1 through 3, you will get underneath your thinking to be more aware of what caused you to think in the ways that you do. We will examine the obstacles to thinking creatively, and also the ways your emotions affect your thinking. We will look at some of the subtle factors that cause you to make decisions of which you are not even aware; once you understand this, you won't ever be fooled by them again. All of these set you up to more fully appreciate chapter 4 where the concept of boundary becomes vastly porous.

In chapters 5 and 6 we continue with our heightened observations, but now we cast our sights toward a little-known emerging body of knowledge, inspired by nature, where examples of innovation literally surround us, inviting imitation and replication. This discovery shows us how we have been seeing for a long time, but not really noticing the enormous lessons before us.

In Part Two, chapters 7 through 14, we focus on active thinking techniques, exploring a host of different tools that will challenge your current thinking style. These creative thinking strategies have led others to “game-changing” innovations, and will open up for you your ability to recognize seeds of ideas where you never saw them before.

In Part Three, chapters 15 through 21, you will be inspired by some innovators who have significantly changed our world for the better, despite facing incredible obstacles. Their stories remind us that no matter what the nature of an innovation is, complex or simple, we all have the capacity to innovate. By reading this book and absorbing its ideas, you will have the tools to innovate.

The innovator sees the same world you do, but sees more. This book will foster the deep curiosity that fades when we leave childhood, so that the taken-for-granted will not be taken for granted any longer.

Throughout this book you will engage in thought experiments that will expand the current limits of your thinking. In essence, this book will change the way you think. As Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, “A mind once stretched by a new idea never regains its original dimension.” After you read this, you will not see the world in the same way that you did before, and there will be no turning back. But as you experience the journey of increasing mental freedom, you won’t want to.

# *Part One*



## Chapter 1

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# *Imagination and Knowledge*

Picture a young man, holding a mirror in one hand and staring at his reflection, and in the other hand pointing a flashlight toward his face so he is looking at himself lit up. He is, apparently, quite engrossed. You have been watching him do this for several minutes.

What would you think? If this was a young child, you wouldn't think too much about it. Children experiment all the time as they explore their environments, so they sometimes do strange things. But this behavior is odd for an adult. You might think that this man is narcissistic, so taken is he with his image, or you might simply dismiss him as "not all there" and give him little thought.

Well, there was such a man, and many thought him to be strange. The American F.B.I. kept a 1,427-page file on his activities<sup>2</sup> and recommended that he be barred from immigrating to the United States under the Alien Exclusion Act. He was a German citizen, and the F.B.I. alleged that he "believed in, advised, advocated, or taught a doctrine which, in a legal sense, as held by the courts in other cases, 'would allow anarchy to stalk in unmolested.'" They were referring, of course, to his involvement with the Communist Party in the early 1900s.

Indeed, something seemed to be amiss with this man, but political affiliations aside, just what was he doing staring into mirrors while lighting his face?

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2 Albert Einstein, 1,427 pages February 19, 2009 <<http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/einstein.htm>>.

Deep in thought, he was imagining himself riding on a beam of light across the universe and back, wondering about the speed of light and how it related to the concept of time. His name was Albert Einstein and these strange behaviors led to his Theory of Relativity.

As Einstein often pointed out, “Imagination is more important than knowledge.”

Einstein was regarded as one of the most brilliant mathematical physicists of the century, although he considered himself as much a philosopher as a scientist. This is a critical point in understanding how breakthrough thinking occurs.

A common misunderstanding of science is this: scientists are unbiased observers who use the scientific method to confirm or disprove various theories. Further, it is thought, scientists collect data objectively, then logically derive theories from their data. Logic will determine what is true or untrue, and right or wrong, because it is the scientific method. According to this line of thinking, science has no other method; this is how knowledge is formed.

This sounds impressive, but it is almost completely untrue.

Data cannot conclusively confirm or falsify theories because it is quite subjective in practice. Scientists, moreover, have been known to defend their theories in the face of conflicting data. The fact is that science is subjective. Further, philosophizing is just as important as observing, measuring and analyzing, when information is being sought or theories are being formed. But as Einstein said, knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand. Logic will take you from A to B, but imagination will take you everywhere. It is imagination that causes you to explore new territories in thinking.

In the corporate world, letting your imagination run away with you is generally frowned upon. If you come up with a new idea, you had

better not share it unless you also have a full cost-benefit analysis and, in addition, can show how the idea fits within the company's time-honored customs.

There are also social psychological principles at work that inhibit the sharing of fresh thinking. We are hired for our intelligence, and in our efforts to succeed, we avoid any actions or statements that might compromise others' perceptions about us. Moreover, if one person debunks another's ideas, it may often appear, perhaps wrongly, that the one doing the criticizing is more intelligent than the one being criticized, because the critical person saw something others did not. And if the criticism is delivered articulately, well, that's even more impressive.

When the radio was introduced in 1865, an editorial in the Boston Post read: "*Well informed people know it is impossible to transmit the voice over wires and that were it possible to do so, the thing would be of no practical value. We have plenty of small boys to run messages.*" When an idea or concept is new, it is easier to see why it won't work than why it will.

There are other inhibiting forces at work that are subtle, yet no less powerful. Consider this situation. Imagine being called into a meeting with the boss and about 12 colleagues where you asked to take part in an informal focus group. Your company makes pet food and supplies. One of your marketing specialists is asking for your reaction to a television ad on a new product. You see a video with three dogs ready to run a race side by side. The camera films from above as each dog eats a certain brand of food shown by the label on his or her collar. Your brand is on the collar of Dog No. 2. The music builds into a crescendo, the starting gun goes off, and they bound out of the gate.

Once the race is over, the marketing specialist asks each of you to state which dog won. Dog No. 2 won. You're next to last among the group in the room. Everyone before you says Dog No. 2. You say Dog

No. 2. It's obvious, the implication being that your dog won because your food is the most nutritious.

You then see a second video, this one with three cats. This time the cats are chasing a mechanical mouse on a track. As in the previous video, each cat eats a specific brand of food, with your brand attached to Cat No. 3. The music starts, the gate opens, and the cats chase the mouse around the track. Cat No. 3 wins. You are asked which cat won. It's indisputable, and you begin to wonder why you're even being asked this. Everyone says Cat No. 3, and so do you.

You are now asked to view a third video. This time there are turtles lined up at a gate, with your brand attached to Turtle No. 1. It's the same scenario: Music plays, gate opens -- but this time, the turtles go in different directions and, of course, very slowly.

When the race is over, only one turtle, No. 3, has advanced a few steps ahead in a direct line, while Turtle No. 1 and Turtle No. 2 are at the sidelines. You are asked which won.

At first you think this must be a joke, but no one is laughing. You start to feel a little annoyed by this infringement on your time and would normally look for a way to leave the room as soon as possible. But what happens next rivets you to your chair. One by one, each person says that Turtle No. 1 (the one with your brand) won the race. You look back at the screen to see if you missed something, but the closing shot clearly indicates that Turtle No. 1 is on the sideline. Even your boss says that Turtle No. 1 was the winner, and no one is looking askance. Everyone says it with a straight face. Now it's your turn.

What will you say?

Will you tell the truth and say it is Turtle No. 3? Or will you say that it was Turtle No. 1, the one with your brand name on its back, that won the race?

Believe it or not, there is a two-thirds chance that you would agree with everyone else that Turtle No. 1 won the race. You wouldn't really change your opinion, but you would say that you agree.

The reason is this: the need for social approval is stronger than the need to be right.<sup>3</sup> It is more important to protect your self-esteem. For this reason, even when people know that what they are doing is wrong, more often than not they will go along anyway to avoid feeling peculiar or appearing to be a fool. Decades of research have illustrated this powerful norm even when the situations have involved complete strangers.<sup>4</sup> This is the principle of normative social influence.

This experiment helps explain why so much creativity is dampened in the corporate world. Our self-esteem and our needs for social approval, for protection and acceptance, run counter to the risk and rejection of new ideas that form part of the creative process.

It is indeed risky to share unsubstantiated thoughts, what-ifs and illogical ponderings, in essence, the stuff creative thinking is about.

How do you make a safe environment for people to share and explore new territories of thinking? With the best of intentions, managers often announce the ground rules of brain-storming sessions, the first being that all ideas are good ideas. It is a good start, but it's not enough, because people will still, understandably, filter what they say. People know that even if a criticism is not uttered, it is thought, and too often evidenced, by a rolling of the eyes or an awkward silence. Even worse is the feeling of

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3 Asch, S. E. "Opinions And Social Pressure." *Scientific American*, 193, 1955: <[http://www.panarchy.org/asch/ social pressure.1955.html](http://www.panarchy.org/asch/social_pressure.1955.html)>.

4 Moscovi, S. "Social Influence and Conformity." *Handbook of Social Psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966: 347-412. Eds. G. Lindzey & E. Aronson, and Bond, R. and Smith, P. B. "Culture and Conformity: A Meta-Analysis of Studies Using Asch's (1952, 1956) Line Judgment Task." *Psychological Bulletin* 119. 1985: 111-137.

sharing an imaginative idea, only to find that it doesn't get written on the flip-chart when all others did.

There are many ways to turn imaginative and impractical thoughts into workable ideas, but first one must indulge in the imaginative world of fantasy without constraint. It is the important precursor to this rich process. You cannot perceive if you cannot conceive.

In working with groups, a few pointers to enhance the brainstorming process are:

1. Invite people from diverse backgrounds to get a diversity of perspectives;
2. Hold the session in the morning when people are fresh and relatively unencumbered by the events of the day;
3. Invite people with a sense of humor. They are the ones who will break the ice, get people to relax and through their jokes and one-liners, cause people to see things from a different perspective and thereby get others to explore new territories of thinking.<sup>5</sup>
4. Follow these guidelines:
  - (a) You have all the money in the world.
  - (b) You don't have to explain how an idea works. Just explain what it is.
  - (c) Be playful. The more extreme the idea, the better.
5. Make it known that quantity of ideas is more important than quality. The more you have, the more you have to work with.

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<sup>5</sup> See page16 for a full explanation of how humor enhances creative thinking.

Quality comes later. In explaining how scientific theories are created, the Nobel Prize-winning chemist Linus Pauling maintained that one must try to come up with as many ideas as possible and then discard the useless ones. Just do not be too quick to discard. As you have seen, even wild ideas may be seeds of value, which can only become obvious if they are developed further.

6. Find what works in a fantastic idea, not what doesn't. See below.

Remember that what begins in the mind ends up in physical reality. Leonardo da Vinci, the great painter, sculptor and inventor, was known for his imaginings. He drew his visions of the airplane, the helicopter, the parachute, the submarine and the car more than 300 years before they became reality. You may not rival Leonardo for his prescience, but you can allow yourself to imagine without evaluating whether your thoughts are realistic or not. We are too often deceived by our own opinions; we have learned what works and what does not from today's reality. But today's musings can be tomorrow's reality.

An essential component of the process is to illustrate how fantasies are used as stepping-stones to practical ideas. The trick is to look for something positive in that fantastic idea, rather than rejecting it for its flaws.

For example, in a focus group sponsored by a travel company, some business travelers were complaining about the hassles of travel today, with extra security checks, long lines at airports, and long hours of inactivity during flights.

They were then asked to imagine their perfect worlds: If they could enhance the travel experience on the plane, what would they change? "Assume the plane is so wonderful that you want to get on it and never get off," the focus group leader urged them. This suggestion fast-tracks

the participants to think of the ultimate experience, rather than the simply new and slightly improved. The ideas began to flow.

“I want a plane that has all the amenities. A chef, a dining room, a wide-screen television, my own living room and an exercise room.”

“Just let me play golf, so I can relax and perfect my score. I want to get off the plane more relaxed than when I got on.”

“I’d like an Olympic-size swimming pool where I can swim laps.”

“I want an Xtreme Makeover to look like a famous Hollywood actress by the time I get off.”

The first fantasy is already becoming a reality. The new Airbus 380 has mini-hotel suites, each with a double bed and living area with a wide-screen television that can serve as your dining room. There is a choice of meals on demand. The chefs may not be on board, but you can read about them in your menu.

There is plenty of room to exercise. It is not a separate exercise room, but rather a case in which we take a piece of that idea and say: “If we cannot provide a room to exercise, what other ways can we provide exercise options?” All you need is a little space for calisthenics, and with 50 percent more floor space on this plane, you have it. The airline could simply provide a menu of suggested exercises as an inexpensive value-added service.

The second fantasy needs more manipulation, because a golf course surpasses space constraints. So we cannot offer it literally, in its totality, but what can we provide it in smaller pieces? Portable putting greens are inexpensive. The airline could provide one, with a choice of instructional wii game consoles to allow people to practice just about anything from their golf swings to yoga.

Extracting smaller pieces, or seeds, from the whole idea applies to the Olympic-sized swimming pool as well. What can we take from this

fantasy? We can provide hot steamed towels with a beauty consultant to provide facials, or a mini-stall for showers using water-saving showerheads.

And what about the Xtreme Makeover? Make it less extreme, but offer mini-makeovers. An esthetician can be onboard to give makeovers and spa-type services. A new haircut may not make you look like a Hollywood star, but it can make you feel like as new person!

Extra services can always be offered at a premium, of course. But you might be wondering about economy class -- these ideas will clearly not work there. But just try to follow the same line of thinking and ask how you can take a piece of the idea and make it work in a smaller way to fit the budget constraints. If you cannot do that, ask what the benefits of the fantasy idea were and then try to achieve them in a similar, less costly way.

## Exercise: Stepping Stones

Suppose that you are looking for ideas to make your commuting to and from work less arduous. Every day you sit in traffic in your car. What can you do? Carpooling, bicycling, walking and flextime are current practices to help alleviate the problem so we won't consider these unless we enhance them in some way. Start by listing some fantasy ideas that you do not expect to happen in column 1. Then in column 2 list some benefits for each fantasy. Now in column 3 come up with some ideas to achieve those benefits in smaller ways.

One	Two	Three
Fantasy	Benefits of Fantasy	Smaller Ideas to Achieve Benefits

No commuting at all	Extra time to get work done and get home every day.	The company provides vans equipped with office equipment so you can start your work day as soon as you get in. The van picks you and your co-workers up who live in your geographic area at the actual time you would be at work so you could leave your house later in the morning and leave earlier at the end of the day.
See friends and have fun instead of commuting.	Work less and have more fun in my life every day.	Once or twice a week vanpool with others and play games or see films in serial times to fit into your commute time.
Learn a new hobby or skill instead of commute?	?	?
?	?	?

By following this stepping stone-method, you will avoid rejecting the whole idea and instead see the many seeds within, each with its own merits. This is a giant leap to unleashing your thinking potential.

I like nonsense, it wakes up the brain cells. Fantasy is a necessary ingredient in living, it's a way of looking at life through the wrong end of a telescope. Which is what I do, and that enables you to laugh at life's realities.

Theodore Geisel  
a.k.a. Dr. Seuss

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