How Original Is Originality?

In a recent film called "*Flash Of Genius*", Greg Kinnear plays real life character Robert Kearns, who fighting a legal battle - to take the Ford Motor Company to court for stealing his invention of the intermittent wiper. The Ford claimed that the patent was invalid because Kearns' wiper system had no new components. It just used electrical devices such as capacitors and resistors which already existed; therefore, they argued, it was scarcely an invention. When challenging this, Kearns brings into the court a copy of "*A Tale Of Two Cities*" by Charles Dickens and asks the witness if he thinks it is a classic work of literature. Of course, the witness agrees. Kearns then reads the famous opening sentence "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times…" and he asks the witness if he thinks Dickens invented any of those words! Naturally, he has to say "No." The same goes for all the words in the book and yet it still remains a great work. I don't want to spoil the film for you in case you might want to watch it but it is a powerful and persuasive argument. The reasoning is that even if you take things which already exist and put them together **in a different order** - that is just as inventive as if you had started from scratch. Indeed, Kearns found a precedent in the United States Supreme Court which stated "It is idle to say that combinations of old elements cannot be inventions; substantially every invention is a 'combination': that is to say, it consists of former elements in a new assemblage."

The same goes for songs. Often during the "*How To Have Brilliant Ideas*" course I mention that I write songs, as part of my "creativity credentials". But then I own up to the fact that I didn't invent any new musical notes and that all the words I used are to be found in the dictionary - I just put them together in a sequence which **hadn't been used before**. People on the course always say that they still think that songwriting is most definitely considered "creative".

In a book called "*Adaptors And Innovators*" (Routledge, 1989) psychologist Michael Kirton puts forward the idea that we are all creative in our own way and that we all appear at different places on **the creativity spectrum**, with "innovative" at one end and "adaptive" at the other. He also developed a questionnaire to discover whereabouts we are on the spectrum. When I first did this questionnaire this, I had one of those typical "light bulb going on" moments - my creativity was most definitely towards the "adaptive" end and that made perfect sense. I have never been able to draw freehand but my artistic drive has found expression in **collage**: surely the perfect medium for demonstrating adaptive creativity - taking pieces of pictures, cuttings or found objects and putting them together in a new form!

Even some of the greatest ever inventions can be seen as a development of what went before - albeit with a dash creative spark. Take the printing press, developed in the fifteenth century by Johannes Gutenberg. Although printing in various forms existed before this time, the press that Gutenberg made was the first to have moveable wooden (and later metal) letters. It could be said that this invention was really only putting together two pre-existing machines. Coins were made by stamping out images and words into a piece of metal; wine was produced by squeezing the grapes on a screw-type wine press. Gutenberg thought that if he put the reverse image of letters into a frame, rather than the image of the head of the ruler of the day and covered the letters with an inky substance and screwed the frame down onto a sheet of paper, perhaps he could achieve a page with printed letters on it. According to one way of thinking, it's not much of an invention: to take two things that are already there and put them together. And yet, this method of printing revolutionised learning, helped speed up the sharing of knowledge and made an enormous contribution to the beginning of the Renaissance.

It can lead into deep and murky philosophical waters to wonder if **anything** is truly original - doesn't everything have its origins in something else which is already there? But there is a strong argument to be made for this approach. Improving what's already there is going to be easier than trying to create something from nothing - because that can't be done! It will probably go some way to stopping that niggling thought that comes into the mind of the person who's insecure about their creativity which goes "Oh, that's not very good, it's too much like something else - it's already been done…" Recognise that kind of negative self-talk?

The message here is that if we tell ourselves not to try to be creative since everything we try to do is derivative, we need to remind ourselves that everyone else is as well! We may be at different places on the creativity spectrum but we all need a starting point from which to start making our creative input. Techniques can be learned to help us get a little further away from what's already there but we need to stop thinking that all inventions are brand new and that we have nothing original to offer because our thoughts are based on previous thinking.

Perhaps we should to take a leaf out of Newton's book. He would be listed among the great original thinkers of history and yet even he acknowledged his debt to those who went before, in his famous quotation: "*If I have seen further it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants*", You can be reminded of the last six words every time you have a two pound coin in your change: they are inscribed around the edge.

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