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*How to Break in to the Area 51 of Your Mind
and Discover your Creativity ...*

How to Break in to the Area 51 of Your Mind: and discover your creativity.

by **GREG STENE, PH.D.**

10706 SW CAPITOL HWY., #46, PORTLAND, OR 97219

greg@creativity51.com / www.creativity51.com

503.267.1990



PREFACE

“The most important failure was one of imagination.”

from the July 22, 2004, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Executive Summary.*

Apparently on the failure of U.S. governmental officials to think creatively about potential terrorist actions before the Sept. 11, 2001 killings at the World Trade Center by al Qaeda operatives. Retrieved Dec. 28, 2010, from

<http://i.a.cnn.net/cnn/US/resources/9.11.report/911ReportExec.pdf>.

[Quote at p. 9 of report]

"I am always doing that which I can not do, in order that I may learn how to do it."

Pablo Picasso. Retrieved Dec. 28, 2010, from <http://www.refdesk.com/apr00td.html>.

In May, 2010, IBM released the results of a survey of more than 1,500 CEOs. For the first time, *creativity* was the trait most valued by these leaders ... previously, qualities such as “operational excellence [and] strategic vision” had placed first. The world was becoming more complex in many ways, and the ability to think creatively was seen as critical for a company’s survival.

Press release retrieved Jan. 21, 2011, from

<http://www-03.ibm.com/press/us/en/pressrelease/31670.wss>; actual report available at

<http://www-935.ibm.com/services/us/ceo/ceostudy2010/>

Section I

INTRODUCTION.

THINKING ABOUT CREATIVITY.

What's it mean to be creative?

INTRODUCTION.

**unseen scary things,
and guards who haven't killed anyone in months.
and maybe it's bugging them.**

You know how it is at Area 51, the place we hold the spacecraft that crashed at Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947. The place in the Nevada desert where they really have discovered the secrets of interplanetary flight by taking apart other ships that have landed. Crashed or otherwise. Our scientists have backwards-engineered them so we can build them for our own use. At least, that's what some people figure.

The story of this place tells us that there are heavily-armed guards in SUVs patrolling its unseen border in the middle of the stinking desert with its harsh sand and rock. Some of those SUVs, you never see. Some, you do. When they come for you.

And especially when you play with where you think the fence should be. Just kind of kick at the ground a couple times there. Just to be able to say you did it when you're back

home drinking with the guys. And then freak-city when some SUV actually rises out of the ground somehow right in front of you (how the hell did that *get there!*) and disgorges these hulking security dudes in black uniforms, sunglasses, and big guns moving incredibly fast, and so totally beyond your ability to deal with them that you pray that somewhere in their brainpans there's a small slot for the word "mercy," associated with your face along for the ride.

It was so quick. You figure the snipers out there in that desert space have had their crosshairs trained on your forehead since you stepped up to that imaginary border, and they've been reporting on your actions continuously. (Most gunners are trained to go for the body mass of the chest, something you can't miss ... well-trained snipers go for a particular small area of the brain stem in that 3-pound mass of goo you carry around in your skull.)

And amerika, your main squeeze next to you on this crazy-trip, decides to stand tall and reach out with both fists and flip off the guys from the SUV and she goes laughing hysterically at them, hands and fingers still extended as they surround her.

Yeah.

That's how you imagine it is at Area 51. Someone else sets the rules ... says that you might get close to the perimeter. But you're not getting inside. No chance.

Kind of like what they've done to our heads over the years:

All those teachers, our friends, other people too many to remember keeping us from that huge curiosity-thing in our heads ... the hairy new ideas of our imagination slammed up and stopped dead before we even know these exciting thoughts are even there ... and replaced by our doing what's expected and backing away from the scary perimeter around the creative-thinking thing in our minds.

Okay, we'll just behave ourselves here now. We'll do normal. Think normal.

They've put a perimeter up in our imaginations, trapped our creativity into an Area 51 up there in our head. We know where it is, but we can't get inside. School rules. Teacher's grading. Parents worried about us going too far too fast growing up. Bosses telling us to sit back, be quiet and just do the damned job. Follow the rules.

And all the while, our own Area 51 is calling.

But you can't go. Because it's a place our society has forbidden most of us from walking. Telling you that your imagination's got to be kept under control, that curiosity really has no place in this world since we've already figured everything out, pretty much. And that creativity's just a waste of time ... and how come you think your ideas are so special?

Hey, Dude. Your life's already set up for you. Just follow the rules, they say.

Besides. What's there to be creative about, anyway?

"Crap," goes your soured head. "Okay. Maybe you're right. I can't think of anything to be creative about, anyway." And that gets a little bit scary. No, a lot scary.

But there's nothing to be done for it, so we tuck our creativity, curiosity, and imagination away into our own Area 51, and we straighten up and begin to play with that brand new incredible 55-inch wide-screen HDTV. Bright shiny distraction, that thing is ... and all those mental guards that society's set up to keep us from entering the Area 51 of our minds seem to have done their job very well with some great distractions. Like that HDTV.

Getting back to it ... the reality of Area 51:

Here's the thing about Area 51. It's supposed to be a semi-secret U.S. military reservation known as the location for the testing of highly secret U.S. aircraft, like the two

Stealth models which came out more than a decade ago. Maybe. There are conflicting reports on the Net as to whether the secret testing even happened or continues today.

That the security is intense and that there are signs indicating the military has the right to use lethal force to keep people out is part of the cultural folklore of the place.

The perceived reality of Area 51:

Area 51 is the place known by a lot of people, from all-out, full-time, paste-posters-about-the-aliens-in-all-the-windows believers in extraterrestrial life, to those moderately interested in the idea of aliens not as a place in the land or a military installation, but as an idea. A really interesting idea. Area 51 has such mystique, such draw, and such cultural cachet as the place of aliens, most anyone would be happy to get inside and take a walk around.

Area 51 is in your mind, as much as in the middle of some godawful desert.

The metaphor of Area 51 in your mind:

Area 51 in your mind is the place of creativity, curiosity, imagination. All of us have an Area 51 in our minds. And nearly all of us have those snipers waiting and those cutting lines of mental barbed wire strung around those talents in our heads to keep us away from them (Area 51 apparently does not have fences, but the visual is a great one, so we'll use it.).

To become creative seems so uncertain and undefined. And you might not get a creative idea and you'll fail. Or your idea might be ridiculed, and so will you. So don't even bother trying.

In the face of all of this, it's nearly the act of a god to be imaginative these days. And creativity certainly can kill relationships, job positions and other things best left alone. Curiosity and asking questions rather than just accepting things mark you as Area 51-level *different* from

everyone else.

And that can make most of us give up on letting our curiosity lead us to new and better ideas. So if we're on a walk by the river and we see the bodies of creativity, curiosity, and imagination floating by on that swampy afternoon, we ain't going to go poking inquisitive sticks into them as they float in the shallow water.

We're just going to get the hell out of there. It's a lot safer than being different.

And even if it looks good, if it looks safe ... if we see creativity, curiosity, and imagination, alive and having a quiet lunch on a sidewalk cafe in downtown Portland, Oregon and they call us over, we're hailing a cab instead. There's no percentage in stirring things up.

But some people can't shake their sense of wonder at Area 51:

The mind's Area 51 is not a place with maps leading to it. It is not a place with landmarks, with billboards telling you that you're nearing something special. It is not a place you can go to with your friends and drink beer afterward and laugh and wonder about how many sniper's barrels were trained on your head.

You have to go to the mind's Area 51 alone. There's no natural road map. No guarantee of finding your way home. In fact, when you reach the Area 51 of your mind, you will be changed forever, and there really is no going home to where and who you were when you set out on your journey. You will be different.

You're right to be concerned about that.

Maybe that's why a lot of us won't visit the mind's Area 51. Maybe deep down we understand that to open the wire-and-wood gates on that desert road that leads to creativity, curiosity, and imagination ... maybe we know that we'll be changed in unknowable ways.

It is much safer to open the garage door in the morning and just drive on down the road to work, like we did yesterday, and do the same thing at work as we did yesterday.

But for some people, taking the unknown journey is what life is all about. Because that's where you find the aliens, where you find your dreams, where you stand fast against those who would keep you from knowledge and growth that is rightfully yours.

And though there are no road maps, a guide is appreciated.

One is available. You hold it in your hands.

THE 2 KINDS OF CREATIVITY.

only two? hey, this is going to be easy.

Let's get something straight first.

There is no one kind of creativity.

The problem is, most everyone seems to think there is only one. But the scientist, the artist, and the business leader looking for new products aren't talking about the same thing at all, so applying the research in one area to another gets very confusing. And it gets very messy when you put them in the same room and have them talk it over.

Everyone having different ideas of what creativity is ... is hurting everyone's understanding of creative thinking.

This book is going to work with the idea that there are at the core, two kinds of creativity.

There is the logic-based creativity:

In this book, we call it Creativity 11 thinking [or C11 thinking]. You find this in most of the creativity we consider daily. Quite often, it's problem-solving creativity. You might see older people in your store having various difficulties (problem), so you creatively offer a service that delivers free to them (solution). Or you're a teacher and you want your students to pay

attention to your lectures, so you decide to quiz them on what you just said at random times during the lecture. Or maybe you're curious about how your butt looks, and you creatively solve the problem and that unfortunate copying machine's got some work ahead of it. Creative solutions to various problems.

And all of these creative ideas are logically developed.

Many inventions also come from this kind of logical thinking ... for example, the invention of the CD and DVD (while very much more complex) really is nothing more than an extension of the idea of storing information on a disk ... think music on records. C11 thinking also includes work that isn't problem-solving, but builds creatively through logical thinking ... like how so many of the movies we see are based on other movies of their kind.

Or consider a company that improves a product they make that already exists.

It's the same thing with a lot of the music and art we encounter ... not really anything new at its core ... it's just a variation of an idea already done by someone else, somewhere, somewhen. This C11 logical creativity also includes many inventions and toys and the like.

And then there's the creativity which seems to have no logical origin:

We call that Creativity 51 thinking [or C51 thinking]. This is the creation of something new that does not seem to have any logical thinking that went into its coming about.

So, what kind of ideas don't come from logic?

Think freestyle poems, books that break new conceptual ground, art that forces you to recognize it as something new to this world. Think of the idea of people ruling themselves through democracy thousands of years ago when there was only the idea of a king ruling by his decision only.

Think of the Internet when it was first conceived. Yes, telephone systems were in place and they might have provided some background thinking in the shape of the Internet and what it could and should not be, but the way in which everyone was connected, and the idea of breaking information sent along the Net into packets was true C51 creativity.

Think of yourself. Think of the way you once changed up a recipe just because inspiration hit you, the time you decided to drive slowly through the fast-food drive-up backwards, the way you wrote a particular phrase in that last Tweet you sent, the way you cropped that last photo on the computer not because of any design rules, but because it just felt right to you. It was all new to you and had no logical thinking behind it. It's all C51.

You can see the clear difference between these forms of creativity. The first, C11, is a logical process, and tends to build on ideas already in existence. You can easily track back the logical thinking steps involved in developing the idea. The second form of creativity, C51, builds something new, with no obvious direct link to an idea before it.

Each creative way of thinking requires a different way of thinking, a different science, a different way of understanding it. And each requires a different way of learning it. So we cannot talk only about one kind of creativity.

C51 thinking is something very different from the C11 creative thinking we generally do as we make our way through our lives. So we'll be looking first at C11 thinking and getting a handle on the ways to approach everyday situations, like the problem-solving creative thinking that goes on behind new ideas for marketing your garage band, for example. Then, we'll move into the non-logical C51 creativity that drives the artist, the writer, yourself sometimes ... the kind of thinking that results in the design of, say, Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, in

Spain.¹ You can see from this magnificent architectural creation that the source for the inspiration for C51 thinking may be something we can't really comprehend. The thing is, the realization or building of a C51 idea will often be comprised of an extensive series of C11 type concepts. For that reason, we build on C11 thinking first, then consider C51 in this book.

Make no mistake, C11 work can be great all by itself. It's logical outcome is what most of us know as creative thinking. And many of the best of the things in our lives ... the movies and the monster roller-coaster designs and the photography. But what of the combination of the beauty and brutal speed of what's called a supercar ... some are incredible expressions of C11 creativity; others like the Bugatti Veyron 16.4,² a 1001 horsepower expression of genius in technology and design, reach the c51 level.

The edge between C11 and C51 can be thin, but it can be so obvious.

C51 is different. It's the mindspace Einstein conducted a thought experiment, where he imagined he was riding a lightbeam as he developed the theory of relativity. It is Newton's comprehension of how the world and solar system work, and it's today's thinking that brings the idea of string theory to consideration of the universe. It's the brilliance of the Beatles after their years of hard work and practice that would drive them into creative places no one could follow. It is the comprehension of human desire unrecognized by the consumer market itself seen in Apple's Steven Jobs' ability to create the iPhone, the iPad, and whatever comes next. It is the art of Basquiat,³ and the art and life of Banksy, both of whom took graffiti to a dimension of

1. See, http://www.guggenheim-bilbao.es/secciones/el_museo/el_edificio.php?idioma=en for images. This is clear C51 thinking. Retrieved, April 20, 2011.

2. See, <http://www.bugatti.com/en/veyron-16.4.html> for a look at this incredible vision brought to life.

3. Jean-Michel Basquiat, produced incredible work until his death at the age of 27 of a drug overdose. That cause of death is too quick a dismissal of what seems to have been an incredibly exciting, turbulent, tough, successful, and profoundly changing life. What is billed as his last painting, *Riding with Death*

artistic expression few, if any have approached.

This C51 creative thinking can produce something as simple as a new coffeemaker. The ideas need not change the world.⁴ What we are concerned with in this book is the *way* in which we think, not necessarily *what* we think. Certainly, we want to produce ideas that work well, but the first step to getting there is knowing how to think creatively, and that's where this book puts its emphasis. Let someone else judge the ideas ... we want to know how to come up with them.

C51 thinking is a quantum leap past the C11 levels into a completely other way of thinking that taps directly into the unconscious, and lets your mind engage in the process called *incubation*, where most of us see inspiration most often occurring. And the incubation, which ordinarily takes days, can be sped up in C51 creativity with the right training and dedication.

To make that jump to C51 is like standing in front of some dark hanger at the end of an Area 51 runway and taking those first steps into the shadows inside, not knowing if you're ever coming back out and under the desert sky.

While you will indeed be coming back into the sunlight, the light will fall on a different person.

(1988) is a worthy last work.

4. This is where the C11 and C51 categorization breaks away from the current Big-C and little-c categories used by some researchers in creativity. We are concerned with the *way* of thinking here, while the other process is concerned with the outcomes or effects of the idea. More about this later.

[A number of chapters later]

BRAINSTORMING – A CREATIVE TOOL.

brainstorming.

thinking at lightning speed. or not.

Everything you're going to read about a group of people getting together and brainstorming can be done by a single person who has the freedom of the mind to rummage about in the unlit places up there. In fact, research has shown that even though we value the team aspect of brainstorming, it's generally less efficient in generating the number (and possibly the quality) of ideas that the same people would develop if they sat at their own desk for the same period and wrote down ideas as they came to them.⁵

But in working by yourself, you'll need to depend on yourself, open yourself to ideas you don't like, be enthusiastic about challenging your own favorite ideas, and have strange thoughts about why you're even giving the alternative view equal consideration. You'll either have fun or go schizophrenic. One of those two is amusing. The other's gotten a bit of a bad rap and the side-effects of many of the remedial drugs are said to be quite awful.

5. A number of resources from Teresa Amabile's, *Creativity in Context*, 1996, p. 245, to several references in the Wikipedia's entry on brainstorming support this. Amabile suggests more ideas may be generated by individuals, but they may not be "higher-quality" ideas. A couple recent research publications suggest we have a lot to consider in this problem of our affection for group-think.

A paper, *Idea Generation and The Quality of the Best Idea*, in the April 2010 issue of *Management Science*, p.591, by Karan Girotra, Christian Terwiesch and Karl T. Ulrich, noted that a hybrid form of brainstorming (first individual-think, followed by team-think) produced the best results in their experiment.

So, though this chapter is directed at groups, it's you, the individual who will find the key to a lot of creative thinking on your own happening here.⁶

You'll find some differences between people about what the particular rules surrounding brainstorming are, but they do seem to boil down to a few accepted points in common. The originator of the process, Alex Osborn, noted these four points (we will develop these later in the chapter):

1. Generate as many ideas as you can – this is the primary goal of brainstorming.
2. There will be no judgment of any ideas or people – If everyone's criticizing or evaluating ideas other people put out, a lot of people will shut down ... and you're not generating new ideas.
3. Encourage the group to go really wild in their thinking – this is one way we get creative thinking going on ... we prime people to think in a certain way.
4. Reprocess, or build on other people's ideas – basically, this means refining another person's idea.

There's an old rule no one even mentions anymore, it seems. We should get rid of it first. The minimum number of people needed for a brainstorming session has been changing over time. Classically, you'd look for about 10-12 or so. But only one or two of you can do just fine. So forget the idea of needing a critical mass of any sort.

Numbers aside, here's a rational look, not necessarily Osborn's, at how it's supposed to

6. An aside ... all this base information on the process of being creative through brainstorming was developed by advertising agency BBDO co-founder, Alex Osborn in the 1940s, more than 60 years ago. If you like being ironic, you might enjoy thinking of him sitting in a room all by himself and without benefit of a group of other people ... thinking up ways of how to get groups of people to think creatively by brainstorming with about 11 other people.

work – the power of a number of people acting in concert spurs the creative juices of each other person, so that the contributions of a single person are greater than he or she would have come up with independently (this idea of the parts becoming more than the simple sum of the parts is called synergy).⁷ The group also offers a diversity of perspectives from which to come at the problem, something a single person is not supposed to have at his or her disposal (this seems to often be quite true). And the group of people is supposed to have the ability to examine a proposed creative solution and build on it, and spur on new creative thinking when development begins to slow (a principle that has been believed to be at least partially true for decades, however even this is currently being challenged – see the previous footnoted report, *Idea Generation and The Quality of the Best Idea*, in which they find that building on others' ideas actually accomplishes very little).

We have a couple more issues we need to worry about here. For a while now, research has shown that group brainstorming has at least a couple other unconsidered strikes against it. The first one is the idea of the process slowing down the number of ideas that a group can come up with. Think of this ... you're in a group brainstorming session and you have a great, original idea. But Sherryl, over to your right's busy talking up her idea and it looks like she's about done when Tanya jumps in with her idea. And this happens again before you can contribute your idea.

7. Someone once said that if you hear someone mention the word "synergy" in any kind of setting, get the hell out of there. Great thought. The buzzword synergy has been overused and inappropriately used by mindless speakers and writers for a while now. However, the idea of synergy is a good one ... the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Consider the idea of having all the disassembled parts of a car in a garage. That's cool, but when you put them all together, it actually *becomes* something different ... something that can transport you from one point to another, something which the group of all the parts alone cannot do. Good working groups of people can indeed, create a synergy of thought. Good groups.

Say this takes up about five minutes of group time. That means that you've been sitting on this idea for five minutes, not even being able to continue developing new ideas because you've got to hang on to this one idea to propose to everyone. The group process has constipated your mind for five valuable minutes. There is no flow of ideas happening here. Just people slamming their heads into a wall, one at a time.

Let's take another quick look at the idea of reprocessing. Building on another person's idea may help develop the quality of that single idea, but it does nothing in terms of developing a quantity of ideas. What you're doing in reprocessing is obsessing over that single idea, and not adding to the quantity of ideas your group is developing.

And the end-goal of brainstorming is to develop as many ideas as possible. We're not looking to create only a couple great ideas. We're looking to create a huge number of ideas, because in those numbers, we expect to find some great ideas.

Why all this concern about a large number of ideas? The idea is that as we develop more ideas overall – compared to fewer ideas – the list of more ideas will have more *good* ideas.

Let's consider an extreme example. Suppose you come up with about five ideas for a new Internet business in five minutes of thinking about it, and you stop there. But suppose instead that you spend a full hour developing ideas for that Internet business. Common sense says that if your mind doesn't get exhausted, you'll generate more ideas in that longer hour-session, than in the five-minute one. And it's no great leap to realize that there should be more good ideas in that longer list than the shorter, five-item list.

The negative rule to take from this is that if you habitually generate only a few ideas,

you'll likely see only a few good ideas, if any at all.

But even the sacred rule of not challenging someone's idea is under challenge.

A recent research article notes how brainstorming groups in both the U.S. and France generated more ideas overall, and more better ideas when they were encouraged to challenge each others' ideas.⁸ This runs straight into the very face of the notion of quiet acceptance as a requisite condition for an effective brainstorming session. It would appear there is little left of the original notion of brainstorming that holds its absolute values of earlier days.

If brainstorming isn't that effective, just what are we supposed to do now?

It's not that brainstorming is wrong. Anyone who's been in a good session can remember the buzz of the energy, the way ideas did flow (though you had to sit on yours for awhile), and you know some good ideas streamed out of your group.

Yep. The problem is that brainstorming turns out to be not well-designed in terms of actually getting the most ideas from people. *Actually, business may be wasting more of employee time and energy by brainstorming than producing valuable ideas.*

So, researchers have been working on what we earlier called "hybrid" models. There's some variance in how they do it, but in general, they'll gather a team together to give them the problem and answer any questions about the issue. Then ... they'll set the team off, each person on their own and alone, to sit down and write out their individual solutions to the problem they've been assigned. People can generate ideas without any fear of other people's opinions or waiting for someone to shut up. And, according to the research, we generally get a

8. The liberating role of conflict in group creativity: A study in two countries, by Charlan J. Nemeth, Bernard Personnaz, Marie Personnaz, and Jack A. Goncalo, *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 34, 365–374 (2004).

lot of ideas out of these individuals acting individually.

After an assigned period of time working alone, the group members then get together again, people speak out the ideas they've come up with, and then they begin to add to those ideas by working in the group brainstorming session.

Brilliant.

But there are issues:

Determine the goal of the brainstorming session itself.

Note that this has nothing to do with developing solutions or ideas regarding the issues.

It is only concerned with what the brainstorming session itself is to produce:

- ⤴ A wide range of ideas – in which generating the largest possible list of ideas is the purpose, believing that good solutions will find their way into the mix. No criticism would seem to be appropriate here in order to maintain flow, and the hybrid method would appear the best overall method.
- ⤴ The best options – this would be the debate process noted earlier, and logically, this would tend to generate fewer ideas because of the time for generating new ideas that is lost to the debate. This may well be the case when compared to well-functioning groups concerned with massive new-idea generation. However, the debate method has been shown in at least one study cross-culturally to yield the better number of creative ideas when compared to groups producing ideas under the no-criticism rule.
- ⤴ Social cohesion – this may seem a weak outcome goal for the group, but in certain instances a group's successful completion of even a small, relatively meaningless project may develop the advantage of a trust and understanding that an inexperienced group

may not have. The simple prior experience of the interplay, play, and pacing, to name just a few issues between people around a table, may be the social glue (or friction) needed to address the problem posed.

Issue 1: Define the problem, and the goals. Clearly.

Don't want to sound preachy here, but you can't afford to forget this reality about brainstorming or life in general ... if you start off at the wrong place, no matter how beautiful your logic is as you progress, or no matter how marvelous your creative inspiration as you develop concepts ... you will end up at another wrong place.

So, you've absolutely got to find the right questions to ask before you begin your journey ... you absolutely must know what the real (not the assumed) problem is, and you must begin there.

Too many groups begin a brainstorming session without clearly defining the problem and the goals of the group. They hear a situation presented, want to solve it in record time because solving problems is the job they've historically been given, and they jump in thinking they've got all they need. It's the way we are in this Western culture.

The energy's to be admired. The lack of clear understanding is to be feared.

Consider a smaller state university that has filled the first 500 of its 600 freshmen slots. But for the final 100 slots, it looks like they've unexpectedly got about 400 fairly equally qualified applicants. This is more than ever before. The economy's gone to hell recently and a lot of people figure that if they can't get a job, they may as well get better positioned by education for when the economy turns around. And a lot of the final 400 applicants have similar backgrounds – a couple years' work after high school, moderate SAT scores.

What's the problem? One problem is that the university has no clearly defined method of allocating entry slots for generally equally qualified freshmen. It never occurred to them that this would happen. The economy's not sucked this badly since the 1930s, and no one really expected or planned for those extreme, strange times again.

So, we have a problem and a goal to reach to solve the problem. In this case, the apparent goal would be stated as ... how do we fairly choose the 100 students from the 400?

But should it be the goal? Is there another way of looking at the problem here? One that would develop new goals?

First, though ... way too often, people confuse problems and goals: Simply put, a problem is what's bothering you. A problem's the confusion, the mess, the horrorshow of life that you're dealing with. Or to bring it to a personal level ... my teeth have suddenly become an ugly shade of yellow overnight (TV ads have taught me that this is unacceptable). My kid keeps getting into trouble. My parents don't understand me. My wife doesn't understand me. My husband misunderstands me. These are problems.

My dog understands me ... that's a real problem.

Problems are the things that are bugging you. Or should be bugging you.

Don't let this problem statement get complex or it'll get away from you.

Good enough. But ... there are always a lot of other underlying problems that give rise to the apparent primary problems we have, and they can in fact be the most important issues we have to deal with. They can be The Actual Problem.

One of those Actual Problems is our expectations of things. If we expect things to go to hell because that's the way they've gone in the past, we might actually prefer that pattern of

failure to continue as opposed to having to deal with the real issues that will make things better. So we sabotage our own problem-defining and solutions by working on the things that are not The Actual Problem. I believe this occurs more often than we suspect.

We may hide from discovering and solving the real issues because we've grown accustomed to things falling apart, and seeing them get better would just totally screw up our world view and make things uncomfortable. Once they started going well, we'd become responsible for seeing that they continue to go well. And that sets us up for a lot of work and heartache.

Best to settle into the seat on that bus we're used to and offer up our ticket to Hell via Failure to the bus driver. At least we know where we're going.

Because of our drive to keep things the way they are and familiar, we often can't let ourselves see the real problems in life. A form of this desire to keep things as they are is called psychological homeostasis. It's one of the central driving motivations of all beings ... seeking to keep things as they are, no matter how ugly. At the risk of oversimplification, think heroin addiction, an abusive marriage, or quitting smoking. Try the first ... the knowledge is that this heroin addiction is killing me, but the pain of kicking is horrible, so the addiction is the best choice, actually. You get it. The addiction, though bad, is rationalized as acceptable because the alternative seems worse. The same with the bad marriage and smoking.

Or, we get caught up in symptoms, not The Actual Problem: We often let ourselves get distracted by symptoms, not The Actual Problem, because symptoms are easier to recognize and deal with. But getting distracted by the symptoms of the problem, rather than The Actual Problem, is guaranteed keep things failing in general.

For example, “My kid keeps getting into trouble” might be the result of the fact that the husband and wife argue with each other to the point of exhaustion every night and the kid’s running from all that. The husband might ask himself in private brainstorming ... how do I keep my kid from getting into trouble?

But that ain’t going to work. That’s not the real problem. The father’s let the problem of the kid screwing up obscure the reasons *why* the kid’s screwing up in the first place.

And there’s the real question he should be asking ... why’s my kid screwing up? That gets to the real problem. Why does this condition exist? Now there’s a responsible Actual Problem question. The answer’s uncomfortable, and that’s one reason it’s so hard to ask the question.

In other words, the problem of the kid screwing up is not The Actual Problem. That’s just a symptom of the real problem. No inspired or deep thinking here. This is nothing more than Psych 101, but this paragraph is just a friendly reminder that the real problem with the kid might lie in dear old dad’s drinking a six-pack at night and his angry side comes out and the kid’s decided he can’t live in that toxic atmosphere, and no matter how much dad tries to address the goal of keeping his kid out of trouble, he’s going to fail because he hasn’t found the real problem to address.

The problem is dad himself.

The father’s finding of the fault to lie with the kid is easier than finding that the fault lies with himself (and not in the stars).

And here’s a weird thing about problems and goals: Generally, the problem statement and the goal statement are just mirror images of each other. Remember the

university's apparent problem? We don't have a way to fairly select 100 students from the extra 400 applicants.

What's the goal statement? Just a reverse of the problem statement – I need a method to fairly select 100 students. The problem and goal statements are so interrelated, all you generally have to do is reverse the problem to rephrase it to what you want as an outcome, to get a goal statement.

So, because it gives direct rise to your goal, a correct problem statement becomes even more critical. Here's a fairly direct problem/goal statement:

Problem ... I don't earn enough to buy a new car.

Goal ... I need to earn more money to buy a new car.

Here's one that's a bit more complicated:

Problem ... We're losing money in this phase of our business.

Goal ... We need to make this phase of our business profitable.

[You've likely already considered the idea that losing money in one phase of this business is generally not the result of a single problem, and the money-loss may be caused by a factor, or factors outside that phase. So seeking out The Actual Problem becomes far more important and wide-ranging. For example, discovering that a low-quality part of the charcoal BBQ grill you produce breaks 2 percent of the time because of inferior materials may not be so much the choice of materials, as it is the mindset of the purchasing department which is willing to choose a lower grade material in the first place. The Actual Problem, in this case is the set of assumptions the purchasing department operates under – the notion that cutting costs is the most important factor

management will use to evaluate their performance. This creates a wholly different goal than the one you'd develop for the "we're losing money" problem that you started with.]

For meaningful brainstorming sessions, you need to spend time as a group examining the problem as it's been presented to you. Is the problem statement a good and true problem statement, or is it a confused mess of issues, such as the kid-behavior thing, or the "losing money" example above? Is there a hidden agenda in the goal statement already provided to you by the people who charge you with the problem? It may be a righteous hidden agenda, or a mistaken one and driven by any number of political, personal, or simply mistaken reasons, but either way, a hidden agenda will most likely put you in a wrong place to make decisions.

Or are you being asked to develop a reasonable goal from the correct problem statement?

Going back to the issue of 400 extra applications for the remaining 100 freshman slots. Rather than just accept an apparently reasonable goal statement by the administration that asks, "How do we fairly select these final 100 freshmen" (and actually, this is really quite reasonable on its surface presentation), your group may want to examine this to see if there might be a variety of acceptable alternative goals to consider.

A reconsideration of the problem may reveal new opportunities. Problem: We have 400 applicants for 100 remaining slots; how do we choose the 100? But think about that creatively for a second, and you might get an alternative goal statement ... how can we accept all 400 qualified applicants?

What? That's completely outside the original problem statement. Yes, but consider how

that changes the equation. This simple reconsideration of the problem is something you develop when you brainstorm the problem itself. But you will never consider it if you blindly accept a problem/goal statement from an administration driven by rules structures.

Suddenly, it becomes clear that the assumption that limiting enrollment to 600 could be very wrongheaded.

Instead, what if you considered taking in all 900 (500 + 400) ... could you add staff and classrooms (night classes at the local high schools), paid for by temporary tuition increases, all on a temporary basis, and allow all 900 potential students to enroll and use that enrollment and a load of public relations effort to show state lawmakers that your university's allocation of education dollars from the state legislature must be increased?

You bet. Funding niceties aside (yes, they're significant but not crippling), you've solved this problem on a practical, and political level. Sure, there are a lot more problems in this new goal statement of accepting 900 students, rather than 600, but it offers opportunity for growth, rather than stunting growth through assumptions that may guide the people who administer to the problems, rather than solve them.

Issue 2: Search, find and destroy all assumptions:

One of the biggest killers of the creative mind is the assumption.

The above example of the problem statement for the university shows how an assumption of having to live within a limit of 600 new freshmen kills off any potential for redefining the situation, and developing new ideas that may serve everyone better. It's the same thing with every one of our creative projects. Assumptions will kill creative potential. Search them down mercilessly and resolve them.

And so we come back to brainstorming: First, get The Actual Problem stated properly. Second, get your goal, the outcome of solving the problem, figured out and stated cleanly. Third, question every assumption you make in those first two steps, whether you're in a city council working session on the homeless, or sitting at your blank computer screen trying to come up with some new ideas for your novel.

And then get a bunch of friends together and brainstorm. Well, maybe not. First of all, where are you going to find a bunch of friends to do brainstorming, and then assuming you did ... what are you going to do with the problem everyone has with the more dim people who tend to come to these kind of sessions?

Bad actors who don't bring a brain to brainstorming: Okay. It's time to deal with this. This book is *not* a 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s touchy-feelie affirmation of everyone's worth, and this book will not ever endorse the idea that everyone has at least *something* of value to offer in a particular situation. A lot of people have absolutely nothing to contribute. Other than complaining, buttscratching, and whining. Or trying to take over the group, and that really doesn't help all that much. This is not very politically correct in attitude, but essentially correct in reality.

You should not ask these people to join your brainstorming group.⁹

The history of brainstorming and bad brains: To understand why brainstorming

9. Traditional think is that we can rehabilitate these people through working with them in the team environment. It appears that's wrong-headed, and destructive to the team's efforts. NPR, summarizing an interview with Will Felps, a Rotterdam School of Management professor: "A bad apple, at least at work, can spoil the whole barrel." Felps added an actor to small groups that were given tasks. The actor played out the role of either jerk, slacker or depressive, "and within 45 minutes, the rest of the group started behaving like the bad apple." Retrieved July 4, 2010 from <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/370/Ruining-It-for-the-Rest-of-Us>.

sessions with a bunch of people might happen to include the less capable, it'll help to examine the history of brainstorming itself. Remember that Alex Osborn, one of the founders of the ad firm BBDO, was supposed to have developed the idea of brainstorming back in the 1940s and made it BigTime stuff in the 50s?

I think the dates are wrong. I'm sure that there was a defining night back in that First Human Tribe From Which All Current Humans Evolved about 50,000 years or so ago (I promised we'd return occasionally to prehistory in this book ... prehistory is so cool ... you can talk about it and no one can pull out a history book and show that you've just made up stuff), when they were all hanging together, quite hungry for a good steak, and trying to figure out how to take down a Hairy Mastodon. Big creature. Elephant-like. Killer tusks. Literally killer. Tasty, however.

And these people are only vaguely coping with their new minds. Suddenly, in evolutionary terms, they've gone from a low brain capacity to the current 1200cc (give or take 50cc or so) and they're finding strange thoughts occurring spontaneously, like whether you can ride a skateboard down a mountainside and what's a wheel anyway. But generally, they're learning things well enough to survive, and right now they've got dressing in animal skins down cold, and having a couple really sharp pointy rocks and a heavy wooden club between them for weapons is pretty cool stuff. But rocks and a club are going to prove to be a major handicap when up against a mastodon.

The big guy who's leading the hunting brainstorming session, Malek, puts aside memories of the old days of his youth when he ran long yards for the touchdown, carrying the head of his Neanderthal opponent that he'd just cut off during the timeout. Malek suggests to

the crowd that they could all have a go at the Mastodon head-on in the morning and beat it senseless with their fists. By God, he'd beaten at least two Neanderthal tribes in a football game on their way to extinction that way.

But Blak, in the back of the night crowd suggests that select marksmen stand off and toss spears at the hairy thing from a distance and wait for it to bleed to death before they approach it. Everyone loves this idea, and then asks ... what's a spear?

Blak, in response, has no idea. But he offers a creative thought. Okay, I have no idea of what a spear is, but we've got rocks. What if we don't confront the Big Thing directly (they called it the Big Thing – their schools being nonexistent they didn't know that it should be called a Hairy Mastodon), like Malek wants us to do, but rather confuse the big beast by sending people from all kinds of different directions? And what if we throw our rocks at the head instead of the body when we do that? Maybe we bring it down quicker.

As a demonstration, Blak unexpectedly slams a rock into the head of the person next to him and the person collapses unconscious. The crowd *oooohs* in understanding.

Malek snorts at Blak, literally, signifying that not only does his idea suck, but his entire clan is also dogmeat for their outright lack of crazy-courage, and Malek begins to insist that his idea is the only one that will work and that closes off the discussion.

Now, what have we learned here: First, we have learned that both Malek and Blak survived the attack on the Hairy Mastodon to spawn descendants who walk among us today. Blak's descendants are the ones who call for meaningful consideration of issues ... some've become politicians, but most are good friends and good people to work with who spend time thinking things through, and they're considerate of others' ideas.

In contrast, Malek's descendants are the ones who sit slack-jawed in the middle of group sessions, occasionally offering up a meatball of wisdom that is so completely off-track and takes everyone by so much surprise that they're unable to marshal the force necessary to just smack the sorry bastard across the side of the head. Some have become politicians who Tweet pictures of themselves, but most are the guys who cut you off in traffic or give everyone bad personnel evaluations at work.

So, the lesson to take from this is that if you call a random, anyone-can-attend brainstorming session, you're likely to have a Malek or two attending. As the research footnoted earlier shows, this Malek-creature can be quite harmful. They can be quite noisy and try to take over the meeting.¹⁰ And when placed in the context of a goal-directed group of people, this beast becomes a major irritant that actually affects the overall performance of the group and yet, according to our touchie-feelie way of dealing with teams and brainstorming, everyone is supposed to value his wrong-headed input.

I say you kick him out. No redemption. No opportunity to come back to the fold. They fail, and they have to deal with that.

Here's why ... not everyone is equipped to deal with the needs of a creative session. Not everyone is able to understand the process of goal-setting to solve a problem, while at the same time think creatively. Not everyone is able to remember to keep his knuckles off the floor.

And the purpose of our work is to find, identify, and encourage the smart thinkers in our

10. A Time magazine, March 2, 2009 article noted research indicating that people who spoke the most at meetings were rated more highly in "general intelligence" and as "dependable and self-disciplined," and the ones who spoke less were rated "conventional and uncreative." An extension to this study found that those who just spoke up more often were rated as more competent, even if they weren't. Retrieved July 4, 2010, from <http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1878358,00.html>. We should expect that current day Maleks know about the effect of the BigVoice, and will use it.

organization. You're going to leave a good number of people behind ... and that's tough. But you end up with a group of people who know how to think creatively. Smartly. Together and independently.

It is manifestly unfair to everyone, your participants and Malek-types alike to keep a Malek in a brainstorming group. Doing so is harmful to the rest of the group, and the value added by having them there in hopes they will contribute is negligible.¹¹

So, what should be the rules in a good brainstorming session?

- **State the problem clearly** and agree to the goal of the session. If there is ambiguity about what it is you're trying to accomplish, you'll end up with ambiguous results. The best results always seem to have their start in a clear statement of the problem and goal, after critical examination of the presented problem/goal for assumptions that may guide your work in the wrong direction.

Also, make sure the problem you're working with is the right-sized kind of problem. Most of us can't figure out how to end world hunger, no matter how many people we know that we may bring to the group. But most of us could come up with a good plan to help distribute food to the needy in our own communities.

- **There will be no judgment of anyone's input or ideas** until the session ends. In general, a sure way to kill off continued contribution of possible solutions or general ideas is to let some yahoo in the group say something like, "Well, that idea sucks, Michael," or

11. This is messy in teaching or working-team environments. How do you deal with the ones who simply don't have a clue? Sometimes, you really can't exclude them. But by defining leadership rights at the outset as being able to control the group's direction and those who speak, the group action may provide a (albeit strong-arm) way to avoid much of the effect of the Malek-type. In addition, tying in grades or overall performance evaluations to performance in the group may help.

“How’s that going to work, Jessica?” These comments not only denigrate the idea, but call into question the person who makes them. There’s no room for this kind of crap. This is where everyone must take on the responsibility of being a leader and stop these kind of comments. You find your true leaders when they arise in these times, not when they are assigned the role. Recognize them. Reward them. Especially when they go after the Maleks.

But recall the research that noted a debate-style discussion of the ideas as they emerged could prove fruitful. An ad hominem remark about someone's intellect or a snarky comment about the idea proposed is not good debate.

Interestingly, a positive comment may be an idea-killer. Praising someone for an idea may suggest unconsciously to the others in the group that that is the direction other ideas should head. Find a neutral way to encourage each other. Also, people who are not praised when another person is may not feel good about their ideas and shut down.

- **The idea is to encourage as many ideas as possible**, and **not** be concerned with quality. One of the reasons you traditionally don’t critique an idea when it’s uttered, is that you want to be sure people feel free to continue to contribute, no matter how silly their idea may be.

The idea behind the assumed effectiveness of brainstorming is in “quantity” versus “quality.” As we’ve noted, the belief is that somewhere in the quantity of ideas flowing freely, the great creative ones will make themselves known. And again, it appears that the greater the number of ideas in a session, often, the greater the number of good creative ideas that occur.

- **In contrast to the accepted rules ... try to avoid reprocessing ideas. Do not build on other people's ideas, or encourage others to build on yours.**

While most brainstorming sessions are run in order to generate a massive list of new ideas and that eliminates reprocessing because it dwells on ideas already stated, there still is the original reason we had for reprocessing that holds some value.

Reprocessing actually values variations on an original idea as much as the totally new idea. Why? Because in tweaking an already-presented idea, looking at it in a new way, it's believed that you might find the working solution. Consider, if someone suggests a green frog as a mascot, another person's reprocessing of the idea as a blue frog to get more attention may be the thing that makes the idea really work. Everyone can build on ideas already in play, so the ability to contribute continues high and people continue working.

Remember though, generally, a brainstorming session is not to focus in on and refine an idea, but to generate as many new ideas as possible. Save this additional step for the stage at which you're evaluating the ideas you've generated.

[Other issues not mentioned in the classic list]

- **Have fun.** Someone else, I cannot recall who, added this factor to the mix. The best groups invariably have fun. You can actually see it on their faces in the smiles, hear the laughter, and watch the loose body language. Once I was alerted to this and watched the groups in my classes for it, I was happily surprised to see how right this idea is. If you're running one of these sessions, this enjoyment in the activity itself is what you want, even if it looks like the group isn't on-task. In contrast, you really want to consider directly intervening in a group that's deadly serious and business-boring if you're running a

brainstorming session. They're probably quite blocked up mentally.

- **You need to assign someone to take notes.** That's critical, and they need to take all ideas down, and not censor individual people by not recording their ideas. People in the group will easily see that their ideas are not being recorded. They, and others shut down when that happens.
- **You need to decide on the leadership you'll use.** Some groups use no leader, preferring to let everyone take on that role according to the situation's need. Some groups, especially the ones dealing with very knowledge-intensive issues, prefer a highly knowledgeable leader so they can act as a technical-issues facilitator. Some groups seek a charismatic leader, often in times when it is important to gain consensus. Some groups just seek a leader who's used to the leadership role to help them move through the process and make decisions.

Both the task and the qualifications of the people involved will determine whether you elect a leader into the system. Consider the task. Would a leader with expertise in creative thinking help? Or do you need a counselor-type to lead the group in brainstorming itself? Do you need an expert in your field of decision-making? Or do you very simply need a leader, regardless of expertise? Or are you dealing with an issue with little expertise involved, such as considering ways to recycle/re-use old tires, and you want ideas more than expertise?

Also, you may want to shift leadership according to the various tasks your group moves into during the session. There's no reason you must stay with one leader.

- **Finally, there's the issue of keeping the session going,** keeping the team enthused.

Let's say you assemble a group for brainstorming according to their skills, knowledge, and creative talents. And they go to work. And they eventually get tired or want to quit. They feel they're tapped out.

But you know that this is the point at which a lot of groups pass from conventional creative thinking, into the really killer creative thoughts. This is because they've exhausted conventional thinking, and they no longer have those old models of processing information and new-idea generation to support them.

So you want to get them back at it, and have them excited about it.

This is one place where reprocessing might help ... try encouraging development, or reprocessing of the "brilliant-but-what-do-we-do-with-it?" idea for further development. Keep tabs on a few of those ideas as you move through the session. Build a short library of the most innovative of them. Bring them up again when the energy of the group has begun to flag overall.

If the idea of "incubation" really has any merit, and it does, you should find that people have been unconsciously reprocessing some of these ideas as the session's continued, and they have more to contribute now that their minds have played with the ideas. With the proper framing and guidance, this new productive look at an earlier idea might well provide your group with new insight into the problem overall, and re-dedication to the problem.

However, if the group remains stalled, you may want to release them to their individual spaces to consider the ideas and generate more of them independently. This opportunity to once again deal with the issue independently without being responsible to

others in the group may well provide the frame of mind to jump to that other, higher level of creative thought. Give them a time limit, and have the reassemble as a group to discuss their new ideas and generate more.

But I'm a loner, single, 14-20 years old, uncertain about society, I dress in black, and they call me Goth when my real name is Garth ...

Brainstorming still works for you loners. In fact, this is where you can shine.¹²

As we've seen, the classic definition of brainstorming requires a group of people. But anyone who has worked in a creative field like advertising, or tried to develop new ideas for their business, or wondered if there's anything new they can do to educate their 3-year-old ... you've all brainstormed. And this is a good time to re-read that section at the beginning of this chapter about individuals doing better than entire brainstorming teams.

And look at those principles of brainstorming. There's not a single thing there that cannot be done by the individual alone, indeed, not a single thing that is not done by every one of us every day as we consider alternatives in our lives.

What we tend to do wrong, however, is that as individuals we tend to go for the easy solution, or we self-censor:

We tend to choose the easy solutions to problems, rather than believe there may be something better if we just think about this thing a bit longer, pushed a bit harder, took a few

12. With our cultural dependence on group-think and teamwork, individual brainstorming can seem just wrong at the outset, no matter what the research has shown. But as we've seen, the group experience may trigger fears of expressing one's self, uncertainty about other members, and people who dominate can keep a lot of very good ideas from flowing into the session. However, it has to be said that if one develops a great group with respect and appreciation for each other among all members, it might be expected to outperform efforts by groups of individuals regardless of the liabilities of a group. However, I've not seen research to substantiate this last point; thus I support the hybrid model discussed earlier.

more chances and thought about it a bit more creatively.

But the fact is, the easy solutions do get us through life. They tend to work so we go with them. But creative solutions ... well, they get us involved in life, not just through it. And a lot of us think that's a better way. And that's the value of the group that you need to bring to your self-work ... the group becomes a person who urges you on to more and deeper consideration of the issues when you're not wanting to push it on your own. You need to build that encouraging part of the group into the way you think about your own efforts. You need to believe in yourself.

Also, the self-censoring problem tends to go away with a good group that encourages you to contribute to everyone's success. If you think of yourself as being as deserving of your contribution as a group is, you've got a handle on getting past self-censorship when you brainstorm on your own. You deserve a good solution to the brainstorming problem. If you self-censor by quitting early, you won't get it.

So, if you're alone ... if you want to create great advertising or movies, if you want to figure out how to get to Thailand and have a summer on the beach, if you want to imagine and shoot landscape photography better than Ansel Adams ... brainstorm by yourself. Every tool that groups use to brainstorm is also yours for the taking as an individual.

Get used to exhausting yourself, then pushing further:

How hard should you push it? For the big stuff, you should work past the point of exhaustion. When you want to quit ... when you've exhausted all the solutions that come to you easily ... well, that's the point at which you know you've got a lot more work to do.

It's interesting that when we begin doing this kind of work, we often think we've really

done it when we get mentally tired. We've worked hard at it, haven't we? We can't come up with more ideas, can we? The thing is, this point of exhaustion is only the point at which we've run through the easy solutions, and we haven't really pushed into the new concepts we really need to develop. It's in this exhausted, but new mental space that we find the creative ideas. The earlier stuff tends to be just a rehash of, or variation on things we've thought about at some time in the past.

Not being negative, but one thing that showed up consistently in the work of my students was the obvious early shut-down on the brainstorming. This is natural, they hadn't been exposed to the idea of brainstorming much before and they had a get-the-job-done attitude the university really pushes these days.

The problem is that there are solutions which seem creative or good but are really just surface considerations ... these come up when you've engaged a problem for a short while. But the great solutions, the really insightful and new ideas generally come after some serious time spent with the problem. Sure, great ideas can happen early, but that's really rare.

Don't shortchange yourself by not giving yourself enough time devoted to the problem. The short-time solutions, the surface considerations are very obvious to anyone well-experienced in creative thinking. And later, looking back on your work, you'll wonder at how you could have let the easy solutions be the ones you chose.

One thing some people find helpful in changing from group- to individual-based brainstorming, is abandoning the need to record every idea. It's critical that you do record all ideas in groups for the reasons noted above. But when you're doing it as an individual, you need to move quickly and you don't have time to be bogged down by writing ideas on note

cards or your palm or whatever.

Some people who write about individualized brainstorming are really emphatic about recording all ideas. Others have found instead that creating that record of the thoughts takes up time from coming up with new thoughts. I've found that writing it all down interrupts the flow of ideas, and the paper trail of cards and scraps of notes I have later is nothing valuable. It all just becomes this stack of useless information I have to keep around and keep going over, like some non-rewarding obsession. [If you decide to have an obsession, make it useful.]

Try individual brainstorming without recording the ideas. Let your mind move freely ... freely associating one thought to the next to the next without concern for recording the ideas ... and you'll find that with practice, you weave a pattern of ideas that makes sense, is highly creative, and one in which the good ideas and the ones worth reconsidering stand out.

When you're done, write the major ideas down. Don't delay. Do it immediately after you're done with the session, otherwise, the ideas will get lost quickly. Just the topic points, don't do detail ... that will get you bogged down and you may forget some ideas you'd like to keep. Also, if you just depend on remembering them later, you might not give your mind room to wander with them and play freely with their development over the next few hours or days ... your head will be too occupied with keeping the ideas in place to feel comfortable to play with them.

You could always video-record yourself using your WebCam, or use a voice-recognition program like Dragon to record your thoughts digitally, or something similar. They're both easy ways of recording the ideas with minimal intrusion or removal from the act of brainstorming. The video does need extensive review since it remains real-time and you have to go through all

that non-responsive time when you review it. But voice-recognition programs “write” the ideas concisely in text on a screen, and only record what you say, so review is quick.

Stupid ideas ... first, accept that they will happen:

When you begin to settle into a brainstorming session, either alone or with a group of people, you need to recognize that the most stupid ideas ... the dumbest ideas in the universe will likely come to all of you at the beginning.

Monkey on a pogo stick. That’s mine. It always comes up.

Yes, Virginia. Contrary to what all the feel-good teachers and self-help books out there tell you ... there are stupid questions. And stupid ideas. From very smart people. And stupid people. And they tend to come up at the beginning of most brainstorming sessions.

How are you going to limit the enrollment of students at the university to just 600? Well ... we could highlight the local crime situation and drive the extra applicants away out of fear, or we could ... and you come up with a number of other seriously deranged ideas. They will come to you. Guaranteed. And unless you unload them properly (I suggest a three-step process), they’re going to keep cluttering up your head, and keep you from moving on in an inspired manner. You’re going to keep thinking about monkeys on pogo sticks. Or something just as stupid and irrelevant.

This is pretty important:

Everyone, in a group or working alone, always has the unquestioned right to contribute what may seem to be a silly or stupid idea at any time, not just at the beginning. No special permission is ever needed to get silly ... anyone who sets you up to believe you need special permission is not really brainstorming smartly. The freedom to be

spontaneously outrageous is exactly what makes brainstorming break from the accepted thought patterns and address an issue creatively. So all ideas, from inspired and on-target, to so-silly-it's-stupid must be honestly encouraged throughout the session.

Stupid ideas ... second, get rid of them:

This is a corrupted bit from the practice of Zen, where you have to deal with random thoughts cluttering your mind as you practice your Zen activity. Brainstorming and Zen are to be done with a clear mind, uncluttered by unwanted thoughts. You can get rid of those kind of thoughts like this:

- First ... Acknowledge the thought as it comes to you. Do not fight it, do not evaluate it, do not bother yourself with it. Just recognize that it has come to you. You might even nod your head in acceptance of its presence.
- Second ... Say the thought so it can be recorded (or given recognition, if you're alone). You have to recognize it (give it that honor) to let your mind know what is being worked with here.
- Third ... Mentally, tell the thought that it has received recognition by your stating it and that it is to leave now.

It's that simple. The thought will leave. You may be surprised at how effective this is. You'll find it also works for those troubling, anxiety-producing thoughts that might keep you awake at night. Don't fight it. Recognize it, state it, and tell it that it's time for it to leave. As with everything else in this book, it will take some practice to get a handle on it, but you'll get good with it if you give it the time and effort it deserves.

This is an excellent way of letting thoughts flow and pass ... do spend the time to get

good at it.

Brainstorming and multitasking:

Don't multitask when you're brainstorming.

Turn the damned phone off, kill your phone's text/e-mail notification beep or shimmy, and tell everyone to leave you alone for these precious moments.

There is no way you can realistically learn to brainstorm or think creatively about anything if you have conflicting demands working on your mental processes. Anything that pulls you from continuous, extended time with the problem is a conflicting demand.

Research has consistently shown that when we multitask, the resulting work is not as good as when we devote our time to each thing individually.¹³ I can tell you that as a professor,¹⁴ I believed I could tell when someone had lost their train of thought because they were multitasking. There were breaks in the work, a lack of a single thread holding it all together ... something small but real that hurt the overall idea.

Please allow yourself exclusive time to learn how to do this kind of exploration.

13. A good research article on multitasking and lowered performance is the 2006, *On the need for attention-aware systems: Measuring Effects of Interruption on Task Performance, Error Rate, and Affective State*, by Brian Bailey and Joseph Konstan, in *Computers in Human Behavior*, July 2006. The problem with this research and many others is that they seem to be based in unwanted interruptions of a primary task, while many descriptions of multitasking these days appear to define the interruptions as actually welcomed and desired by the person performing the work.

For example, the Nov. 21, 2010 article in the New York Times, *Growing Up Digital, Wired for Distraction*, by Matt Richtel, talks about how young people multitask to relieve themselves of boredom. There is little research, if any, in the way of performance loss within a *desired* multitasking environment. The caution raised in the article is the issue of whether this moving from task-to-task is hardwiring the brain in a way that makes concentrated time on any project impossible. Retrieved Nov. 23, 2010, from http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/21/technology/21brain.html?_r=1&hp=&pagewanted=all, may be unavailable except by subscription now.

14. Assistant and associate professor, technically.

Here's the best thing to take from this chapter:

Question every assumption ...

This statement is no political 1960's bumper sticker saying, "Question Authority." This is far more important. Far more powerful. "Question every assumption." Make it your mantra. Because when you accept conventional thinking or the boundaries drawn by assumptions, you cannot be creative. When you accept conventional thinking or boundaries, you accept the way things are.

That will kill the soul.