TED talks are lying to you

The creative class has never been more screwed. Books about creativity have never been more popular. What gives?

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The writer had a problem. Books he read and people he knew had been warning him that the nation and maybe mankind itself had wandered into a sort of creativity doldrums. Economic growth was slackening. The Internet revolution was less awesome than we had anticipated, and the forward march of innovation, once a cultural constant, had slowed to a crawl. One of the few fields in which we generated lots of novelties — financial engineering — had come back to bite us. And in other departments, we actually seemed to be going backward. You could no longer take a supersonic airliner across the Atlantic, for example, and sending astronauts to the moon had become either fiscally insupportable or just passé.

And yet the troubled writer also knew that there had been, over these same years, fantastic growth in our creativity promoting sector. There were TED talks on how to be a creative person. There were “Innovation Jams” at which IBM employees brainstormed collectively over a global hook up, and “Thinking Out of the Box” desktop sculptures for sale at Sam’s Club. There were creativity consultants you could hire, and cities that had spent billions reworking neighborhoods into arts-friendly districts where rule-bending whimsicality was a
thing to be celebrated. If you listened to certain people, creativity was the story of our time, from the halls of MIT to the incubators of Silicon Valley.

The literature on the subject was vast. Its authors included management gurus, forever exhorting us to slay the conventional; urban theorists, with their celebrations of zesty togetherness; pop psychologists, giving the world step-by-step instructions on how to unleash the inner Miles Davis. Most prominent, perhaps, were the science writers, with their endless tales of creative success and their dissection of the brains that made it all possible.

It was to one of these last that our puzzled correspondent now decided to turn. He procured a copy of “Imagine: How Creativity Works,” the 2012 bestseller by the ex-wunderkind Jonah Lehrer, whose résumé includes a Rhodes scholarship, a tour of duty at The New Yorker and two previous books about neuroscience and decision-making. (There was also a scandal concerning some made-up quotes in “Imagine,” but our correspondent was determined to tiptoe around that.) Settling into a hot bath — well known for its power to trigger outside-the-box thoughts — he opened his mind to the young master.

Anecdote after heroic anecdote unfolded, many of them beginning with some variation on Lehrer’s very first phrase: “Procter and Gamble had a problem.” What followed, as creative minds did their nonlinear thing, were epiphanies and solutions. Our correspondent read about the invention of the Swiffer. He learned how Bob Dylan achieved his great breakthrough and wrote that one song of his that they still play on the radio from time to time. He found out that there was a company called 3M that invented masking tape, the Post-it note and other useful items. He read about the cellist Yo-Yo Ma, and about the glories of Pixar.

And that’s when it hit him: He had heard these things before. Each story seemed to develop in an entirely predictable fashion. He suspected that in the Dylan section, Lehrer would talk about “Like a Rolling Stone,” and that’s exactly what happened. When it came to the 3M section, he waited for Lehrer to dwell on the invention of the Post-it note — and there it was.

Had our correspondent developed the gift of foresight? No. He really had heard these stories before. Spend a few moments on Google and you will find that the tale of how Procter & Gamble developed the Swiffer is a staple of marketing literature. Bob Dylan is endlessly cited in discussions of innovation, and you can read about the struggles surrounding the release of “Like a Rolling Stone” in textbooks like “The Fundamentals of Marketing” (2007). As for 3M, the decades-long standing ovation for the company’s creativity can be traced all the way back to “In Search of Excellence” (1982), one of the most influential business books of all time. In fact, 3M’s accidental invention of the Post-it note is such a business-school chestnut that the ignorance of those who don’t know the tale is a joke in the 1997 movie “Romy and Michele’s High School Reunion.”

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These realizations took only a millisecond. What our correspondent also understood, sitting there in his basement bathtub, was that the literature of creativity was a genre of surpassing banality. Every book he read seemed to boast the same shopworn anecdotes and the same canonical heroes. If the authors are presenting themselves as experts on innovation, they
will tell us about Einstein, Gandhi, Picasso, Dylan, Warhol, the Beatles. If they are celebrating their own innovations, they will compare them to the oft-rejected masterpieces of Impressionism — that ultimate combination of rebellion and placid pastel bullshit that decorates the walls of hotel lobbies from Pittsburgh to Pyongyang.

Those who urge us to “think different,” in other words, almost never do so themselves. Year after year, new installments in this unchanging genre are produced and consumed. Creativity, they all tell us, is too important to be left to the creative. Our prosperity depends on it. And by dint of careful study and the hardest science — by, say, sliding a jazz pianist’s head into an MRI machine — we can crack the code of creativity and unleash its moneymaking power.

That was the ultimate lesson. That’s where the music, the theology, the physics and the ethereal water lilies were meant to direct us. Our correspondent could think of no books that tried to work the equation the other way around — holding up the invention of air conditioning or Velcro as a model for a jazz trumpeter trying to work out his solo.

And why was this worth noticing? Well, for one thing, because we’re talking about the literature of creativity, for Pete’s sake. If there is a non-fiction genre from which you have a right to expect clever prose and uncanny insight, it should be this one. So why is it so utterly consumed by formula and repetition?

What our correspondent realized, in that flash of bathtub-generated insight, was that this literature isn’t about creativity in the first place. While it reiterates a handful of well-known tales — the favorite pop stars, the favorite artists, the favorite branding successes — it routinely ignores other creative milestones that loom large in the history of human civilization. After all, some of the most consistent innovators of the modern era have also been among its biggest monsters. He thought back, in particular, to the diabolical creativity of Nazi Germany, which was the first country to use ballistic missiles, jet fighter planes, assault rifles and countless other weapons. And yet nobody wanted to add Peenemünde, where the Germans developed the V-2 rocket during the 1940s, to the glorious list of creative hothouses that includes Periclean Athens, Renaissance Florence, Belle Époque Paris and latter-day Austin, Texas. How much easier to tell us, one more time, how jazz bands work, how someone came up with the idea for the Slinky, or what shade of paint, when applied to the walls of your office, is most conducive to originality.

But as any creativity expert can tell you, no insight is an island, entire of itself. New epiphanies build on previous epiphanies, and to understand the vision that washed over our writer in the present day, we must revisit an earlier flash of insight, one that takes us back about a decade, to the year 2002. This time our future correspondent was relaxing in a different bathtub, on Chicago’s South Side, where the trains passed by in an all-day din of clanks and squeaks. While he soaked, he was reading the latest book about creativity: Richard Florida’s “The Rise of the Creative Class.”

Creativity was now the most valuable quality of all, ran Florida’s argument, “the decisive source of competitive advantage.” This made creative people into society’s “dominant class” — and companies that wished to harness their power would need to follow them wherever they went. Therefore cities and states were obliged to reconfigure themselves as havens for people of nonconformist tastes, who would then generate civic coolness via art zones, music scenes, and truckloads of authenticity. The author even invented a “Bohemian Index,” which, he claimed, revealed a strong correlation between the presence of artists and economic growth.

Every element of Florida’s argument infuriated our future correspondent. Was he suggesting planned bohemia? Built by governments? To attract businesses? It all seemed like a comic exercise in human gullibility. As it happened, our correspondent in those days spent nearly all his time with the kinds of people who fit Richard Florida’s definition of the creative class: writers, musicians, and intellectuals. And Florida seemed to be suggesting that such people were valuable mainly for their contribution to a countercultural pantomime that lured or inspired business executives.

What was really sick-making, though, was Florida’s easy assumption that creativity was a thing our society valued. Our correspondent had been hearing this all his life, since his
childhood in the creativity-worshipping 1970s. He had even believed it once, in the way other generations had believed in the beneficence of government or the blessings of Providence. And yet his creative friends, when considered as a group, were obviously on their way down, not up. The institutions that made their lives possible — chiefly newspapers, magazines, universities and record labels — were then entering a period of disastrous decline. The creative world as he knew it was not flowering, but dying.

When he considered his creative friends as individuals, the literature of creativity began to seem even worse — more like a straight-up insult. Our writer-to-be was old enough to know that, for all its reverential talk about the rebel and the box breaker, society had no interest in new ideas at all unless they reinforced favorite theories or could be monetized in some obvious way. The method of every triumphant intellectual movement had been to quash dissent and cordon off truly inventive voices. This was simply how debate was conducted. Authors rejoiced at the discrediting of their rivals (as poor Jonah Lehrer would find in 2012). Academic professions excluded those who didn’t toe the party line. Leftist cliques excommunicated one another. Liberals ignored any suggestion that didn’t encourage or vindicate their move to the center. Conservatives seemed to be at war with the very idea of human intelligence. And business thinkers were the worst of all, with their perennial conviction that criticism of any kind would lead straight to slumps and stock market crashes.

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Or so our literal-minded correspondent thought back in 2002. Later on, after much trial and error, he would understand that there really had been something deeply insightful about Richard Florida’s book. This was the idea that creativity was the attribute of a class — which class Florida identified not only with intellectuals and artists but also with a broad swath of the professional-managerial stratum. It would take years for our stumbling innovator to realize this. And then, he finally got it all at once. The reason these many optimistic books seemed to have so little to do with the downward-spiraling lives of actual creative workers is that they weren’t really about those people in the first place.

No. The literature of creativity was something completely different. Everything he had noticed so far was a clue: the banality, the familiar examples, the failure to appreciate what was actually happening to creative people in the present time. This was not science, despite the technological gloss applied by writers like Jonah Lehrer. It was a literature of superstition, in which everything always worked out and the good guys always triumphed and the right inventions always came along in the nick of time. In Steven Johnson’s “Where Good Ideas Come From” (2010), the creative epiphany itself becomes a kind of heroic character, helping out clueless humanity wherever necessary:

Good ideas may not want to be free, but they do want to connect, fuse, recombine. They want to reintegrate themselves by crossing conceptual borders. They want to complete each other as much as they want to compete.

And what was the true object of this superstitious stuff? A final clue came from “Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention” (1996), in which Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi acknowledges that, far from being an act of individual inspiration, what we call creativity is simply an expression of professional consensus. Using Vincent van Gogh as an example, the author declares that the artist’s “creativity came into being when a sufficient number of art experts felt that his paintings had something important to contribute to the domain of art.” Innovation, that is, exists only when the correctly credentialed hive-mind agrees that it does. And “without such a response,” the author continues, “van Gogh would have remained what he was, a disturbed man who painted strange canvases.” What determines “creativity,” in other words, is the very faction it’s supposedly rebelling against: established expertise.

Consider, then, the narrative daisy chain that makes up the literature of creativity. It is the story of brilliant people, often in the arts or humanities, who are studied by other brilliant people, often in the sciences, finance, or marketing. The readership is made up of us — members of the professional-managerial class — each of whom harbors a powerful suspicion that he or she is pretty brilliant as well. What your correspondent realized, relaxing there in his tub one day, was that the real subject of this literature was the professional-managerial audience itself, whose members hear clear, sweet reason when they listen to NPR and think they’re in the presence of something profound when they watch
some billionaire give a TED talk. And what this complacent literature purrs into their ears is that creativity is their property, their competitive advantage, their class virtue. Creativity is what they bring to the national economic effort, these books reassure them — and it’s also the benevolent doctrine under which they rightly rule the world.

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Thomas Frank's most recent book is "Pity the Billionaire." He is also the author of "One Market Under God" and the founding editor of "The Baffler" magazine.

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THE WEIRDEST GOLDEN GLOBE CHOICES EVER

Best Actor in a Comedy, Matt LeBlanc, "Episodes" (2011)

Let's start with the rather inconsequential television awards -- which don't even try to predict what will happen at the Emmys, but instead go their own wild way. LeBlanc is a talented guy, but the actor's win for a little-watched Showtime comedy was very strange -- especially because in so doing he beat out a field including two other stars of cable shows.
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