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Catalyst News and Views from AnnA  
Your Personal Development & Creativity Newsletter  
20 March, 2009

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Lots of ideas to kick start your creativity in time for the Spring equinox and feed those burgeoning shoots of ideas, thoughts and plans. Plus some advice on one of the greatest gifts you can ever give another person - that of truly listening to them. Best wishes for your continuing love of life, creativity, and all the gifts your life brings you - AnnA - your Creative Catalyst

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- Fancy yourself as a TV critic?
- Exploring Creativity Workshop - this Saturday!

THE FOURTH 'R' FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

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I know I covered the three 'R' of personal development last time, but there is another one that is critical to child development. I was watching David Baddiel's TV programme this week on investigating how children learn and was delighted to see the acknowledgement by one 'expert' that music is critical in helping children to read - shame it has vanished from too many schools.

The R in question here is rhythm, and according to a new report in the Psychology of Music journal, music tuition can help children improve their reading skills. A year long study where kids were exposed to music listening, performing and learning to sing or play an instrument found that they showed superior cognitive performance in reading skills compared with their non-musically trained peers.

The authors of the study studied children the two US elementary schools, one of which routinely trained children in music and one that did not. Other studies have previously shown a link between increased ability in language, mathematics and spatial awareness but this is the first to show the link to increased reading skills when the children were tested at the end of a year. So if you want to improve a child's ability to read, beat out that rhythm on a drum - or guitar, or keyboard, or whatever comes to hand.

## NEW PROFIT SHARING AGREEMENT FOR AUTHORS

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The standard author contract with a publisher offers a percentage of the royalties, and if you lucky - or a best seller - you will probably be offered a 'sliding scale' of royalties that increases the more you sell. Now, The Friday Project which is an imprint of Harper Collins is set to change that tradition. Their author contracts are to be profit share agreements with profit equally shared between the author and the publisher, though as the Friday Project are going to put a lot of their books online free of charge its hard to see where the profit is in that for the author. They argue that most of their authors are more interested in being read, than worrying about their books being pirated from the site - well not me, matey. I want payment and protection for my copyright thanks very much.

Author advances have certainly shrunk in the past few years with an average now of no more than £1000, and this new contract means no advance at all. They are looking really to attract authors who are internet savvy and will do a lot of their own publicity, but my experience has always been that if you want to promote your book you do pretty much have to do it yourself unless you are a big name - as they get the majority of the publicity budget.

## MAJOR CASH POETRY PRIZE

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Poets are usually the poor relation of the literary award world, but the Glasgow Poetry Society have launched the Edwin

Morgan International Poetry Competition in association with their sponsors - Strathclyde University. This year's judges will be the distinguished poet, novelist and playwright, Ron Butlin and the young poet, Polly Clark and they have a first prize of £5000 to award to the lucky winner, which is not to be sneezed at.

If you fancy your chances then a poem of up to 60 lines can be entered by post or through their website and each entry will cost you £5. You only have until the 2nd of June to submit your entry, so check out the rules and regulations on the website and download the entry form at <http://vitalsynz.co.uk>

### DO YOU REALLY MEAN THAT?

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Eats, Shoots and Leaves by Lynne Truss opened our eyes to the appalling difference a comma can make to the sense of a sentence. What amazes me is how people can write a sentence that quite clearly contradicts what they probably meant to say and just not realise it. Here are a couple of examples to show you what I mean, all from printed materials, which makes you wonder if the ancient art of proofreading is finally dead:

'Man Kills Self Before Shooting Wife and Daughter' though how he managed it is a bit of a mystery. I am all in favour of forward planning though this is taking it a bit too far for me, what do you think?

Something Went Wrong in Jet Crash, Expert Says and that is not an expert I will be consulting anytime soon if that is the sum extent of his wisdom.

Miners Refuse to Work after Death which may seem a trifle mean-spirited of them if you assume the literal truth of the headline, however if it means they downed tools after the death of a colleague that would be different, but how can we tell?

War Dims Hope for Peace comes under the realm of the bleeding obvious, but the absolute prizewinner has to be this one:

Typhoon Rips Through Cemetery; Hundreds Dead conjures up an amazing vision. After all how many dead people would you expect to find in a cemetery?

Creative exercise:

Now could you take any of those headlines and make them the basis for an anecdote or short story?

## STUCK FOR IDEAS? GET THE PHOTO ALBUM OUT

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The benefit of doing some creative writing on a regular basis can't be over-emphasised. You are literally 'priming the pump' and if you don't have a current book or project on hand then creative exercises will keep the brain ticking over.

If you have run out of inspiration, a good place to go is an old photo album. Take out a few pictures and spread them in front of you. What you are looking to do is imagine you don't know the people or the places in them, but you are trying to find a connecting thread that would bring them together in a story.

Really look at the photos and get the details; is there an expression on someone's face that could be telling a different story from the photograph as a whole? That picture of the family picnic at Cheddar Gorge, what else could be going on there and why is one person sitting at a greater distance from the others?

If photographs don't inspire you then go to your record collection and pick something you haven't heard for a while. Close your eyes and let pictures form to the music, then use that as the basis to write from.

## KEY WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR LISTENING SKILLS

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We all want to be heard and understood, but one of the key skills we need in order to express ourselves is actually not to speak at all but to focus on truly listening. Mostly we are not really paying attention to the detail, but waiting for our chance to put our own point of view - rather like the tv interviewer who has a fixed list of questions and is studying the next one before the answer has come to the last one. Because of that they often miss a key phrase or piece of information that could have widened their understanding and lifted the conversation to a whole new level.

If you want to improve your listening skills there is an excellent book called 'Clean Language' by Judy Rees and Wendy Sullivan from which this exercise is taken.

Study these points and see where you most need to pay attention:

- 1) Put your attention on what the other person is actually saying rather than on the person themselves or what you think they might mean by their words.
- 2) "Soft focus" your eyes to take in the whole scene, rather than looking into the eyes of the other person.
- 3) Give them time: don't be impatient for your chance to talk.
- 4) Set your personal agenda aside, at least temporarily.
- 5) Visualise: mentally create your own diagram or model of what the other person is saying but remember it is just that - your diagram or model, not theirs.
- 6) Believe what the other person is saying. Treat the words as if they are literally true for the speaker.
- 7) Repeat back some of their words or phrases exactly as you heard them.
- 8) Take notes, if appropriate, if it helps you to pay attention.
- 9) Turn your internal commentator [the voice inside your head that prevents you from listening properly] down or off.

Do those things and you will gain knowledge and insight, and the gratitude of the person you are listening to.

## CREATIVITY CLIPS

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1 Fancy yourself as a TV critic? There's an opportunity to write paid reviews of television programmes ranging from current affairs to light entertainment on a new website run by MF Publishing. They are welcoming new and experienced writers who will submit a minimum of two 500-600 word reviews a month and have their own profile on the website - so money

and fame!

If you are interested, just submit a 500 word review of a programme in the genre you mostly watch - for example documentaries or soaps or crime drama - and then write another one in a completely different genre such as cookery programmes or reality TV.

Your manuscript should be typed in 14 point Times New Roman and, most unusually, should be sent both by post and email together with a covering letter saying how many reviews a month you could write and what your preferred genres are. Add in a CV and an A5 stamped addressed envelope and email to [mfpublishing@ntlworld.com](mailto:mfpublishing@ntlworld.com) plus sending it to MF Publishing (Applications), New Cobon House, Suite 210, 3 Cobon Road, London E3 2DA. If you want to check out their website first, it's at <http://mfpublishing.wordpress.com>

2 Exploring Creativity workshop - this Saturday. I know it's very short notice, but I only just heard about it myself. Any of you within reach of Twickenham and free on the day might be interested to ring and see if places are available. It is to be a stimulating day of writing, sculpture, drawing and engaging group discussion to give you an opportunity for people to create time to focus on your creative growth.

It's a full day programme and includes Inventing Confidence and The Organic Process of Writing with writing coach Jacqui Lofthouse, Drawing from Within with Artist and Life Coach, Lee Campbell, Creating Visual Goals with Conceptual Artist, Julia Ruppert and Ornament & Perception explore the impact sculpture has had through history on our experience of the landscape with Antiquarian, Sharon Powell.

Call 07711 938 921 for more information or email [info@collective-arts.org](mailto:info@collective-arts.org) - but don't leave it too long!

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Any questions, comments or criticisms? I love to hear your views and your experience, or feedback on any items in the newsletter, so do please do contact me at:  
<http://www.catalystonline.co.uk>  
or email [anna@creativecatalyst.co.uk](mailto:anna@creativecatalyst.co.uk)

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Catalyst News and Views from AnnA  
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6 March, 2009

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Well I hope you have your thinking caps on because in this issue we are looking at stimulating your brain, and reminding you of the 3R's, though not I suspect the ones you learned at school. Best wishes for your continuing love of life, creativity, and all the gifts your life brings you - AnnA - your Creative Catalyst

IN THIS ISSUE:

- GREY, GREY GO AWAY?
- THE 3 R's
- TEXTING GOOD OR BAD?
- THE 5 ELEMENTS OF BRAIN TRAINING

CREATIVITY CLIPS:

- Need a creative retreat?
- Try this ...

GREY, GREY GO AWAY?

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In a society that increasingly wants to fight the signs of ageing, going grey is greeted with dismay. What has always fascinated me is the rate at which people's hair starts the process and why some are grey at 30 while others keep their hair colour into their sixties.

We equate grey hair with becoming mature and full of wisdom, but the actual reason hair turns grey is much more scientific. It is caused by a massive build up of hydrogen peroxide due to wear and tear of our hair follicles. The peroxide blocks the normal synthesis of melanin, our hair's natural pigment, and that means our hair is being naturally bleached and gradually loses its colour going first grey and then white.

By examining cell cultures of human hair follicles researchers have discovered that the build up of hydrogen peroxide is

caused by a reduction of an enzyme that breaks up hydrogen peroxide into water and oxygen (catalase). Sadly there is no turning the clock back as our hair follicles cannot repair the damage caused by the hydrogen peroxide because of low levels of enzymes that normally carry out this renewal. Melanin is produced in the hair follicles and needs the enzyme tyrosinase to do this, but the high levels of hydrogen peroxide mean that its production is disrupted.

So going grey is a natural function of growing older, and so far there is no way of avoiding that, except by restoring the colour artificially through hair dye.

Creative exercise:

Now why am I telling you all this? Because it makes the basis for an interesting creative exercise; now either write a first person account of your feelings on your hair going grey, or perhaps your parents, or your own feelings about the whole process. Or use it as a basis for a character in a sketch as part of what you know about them, and how relevant it is to how they behave.

## THE THREE R'S



It used to be reading, writing and arithmetic but there is a new take on them that I want to share with you. I would call them the cardinal rules of personal development and unless you pay attention to them all equally then you are missing something very important in your own personal growth.

1 Respect for self is the basis from which all good actions come because when you know and respect who you are you behave in a way that is congruent and consistent. Others know who you are, and what they can expect from you without any obfuscation (this week's great word). New age philosophers tend to talk of it in terms of self esteem or self worth, and it doesn't matter what you call it as long you have a strong secure knowledge of who you are. That's the place you can best be of great service to others.

2 Respect for others comes naturally out of respect for self because you are acting from integrity you hold others to that same high standard. You may profoundly disagree with someone over an issue, but you can still respect them as a human being.

3 Responsibility for all your actions can be a tough one, but without responsibility then how can you respect yourself? Responsibility is a heavy word that we tend to avoid, but it is essential because if we don't take responsibility for our actions then we are in a true sense denying that they are anything to do with us. We have stepped back from ourselves by denying our responsibility for an outcome of our own actions, something we see more and more often in a culture that looks for someone to blame - or someone to sue. Remember responsibility is merely the ability to respond - we all have it, we just don't always exercise it.

### TEXTING GOOD OR BAD?

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I have to declare my prejudice right upfront. I do have creative clients who send me work that is littered with text speak and it makes me weep for all the wonderful words they could have been using when they write RUOK instead of writing 'are you okay' or many of the other forms it takes. But research is proving my prejudice wrong as apparently rather than harming literacy, a new study says it could have a positive effect on the way children interact with language.

Some smart researchers from Coventry University, who are undoubtedly keen texters themselves, did a study on 88 children aged between 10 and 12 to understand the impact of text messaging on their language skills. The results were recently published in the British Journal of Developmental Psychology and they seem to indicate that text language could be having a positive impact on their ability to read, and to develop that reading skill further.

The children involved in the study were given 10 different scenarios and asked to write about them using text messages and these were then analysed for their use of language alongside more traditional schoolwork. They found no significant difference in the language used between the two groups.

Dr Beverley Plester, the lead author of the report, believes that texting is likely to be an important part of a child's learning development, because the more exposure you have to

the written word the more literate you become. Plus we tend to get better at things that we do for fun, and certainly most children I know seem to text as naturally as breathing.

I have read several novels written as text messages and I have to say I wasn't impressed, but I guess I have to bow to the experts and accept that it is improving reading skills, though I personally have seen little evidence of it among teenagers I know. But if it really does help, then I am all in favour of it.

### HEAR THE MUSIC WHILE YOU CAN

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Every day in my inbox I get sent round robin letters urging me to pass them on, and generally I don't but this one struck me as having a very positive message. Dr. Dennis Shields, Professor in the Department of Developmental and Molecular Biology in New York has a teenage cancer patient with only 6 months to live. She wrote this poem in the hope it would make us stop and think - and that's why I am sharing it with you - it's called Slow Dance:

"Have you ever watched kids  
On a merry-go-round?  
Or listened to the rain  
Slapping on the ground?

Ever followed a butterfly's erratic flight?  
Or gazed at the sun into the fading night?  
You better slow down.  
Don't dance so fast.

Time is short.  
The music won't last.

Do you run through each day  
On the fly?  
When you ask How are you?  
Do you hear the reply?

When the day is done  
Do you lie in your bed  
With the next hundred chores  
Running through your head?

You'd better slow down  
Don't dance so fast.  
Time is short.  
The music won't last.

Ever told your child,  
We'll do it tomorrow?  
And in your haste,  
Not see his sorrow?

Ever lost touch,  
Let a good friendship die  
Cause you never had time  
To call and say, 'Hi'

You'd better slow down.  
Don't dance so fast.  
Time is short.  
The music won't last.

When you run so fast to get somewhere  
You miss half the fun of getting there.  
When you worry and hurry through your day,  
It is like an unopened gift....Thrown away

Life is not a race.  
Do take it slower  
Hear the music  
Before the song is over."

Creative exercise:

What does that evoke for you? For me it is the sad knowledge that I have often in the past few years made expensive journeys to the funerals of friends and relatives, and yet couldn't afford the time to see them when they were alive. We use our creativity to explore our feelings, to empathise and share with others our inner landscape, and sometimes it takes someone who won't be seeing that view to remind us of what is important in our own lives.

What about you? Could you write a couple of paragraphs about your response to that poem, how it impacted you and whether it made you think differently about anything?

THE 5 ELEMENTS OF BRAIN TRAINING

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We all want to do what we can to keep our minds sharp and active, and there are now plenty of gadgets out there to help you do that. Brain Training programmes are very popular, but can be expensive, so I thought I would remind you of the things you can do for free to keep the brainbox lively.

### 1. Nourish it

You don't have to buy specific supplements, just eat a good varied diet and keep processed food, fats, alcohol and caffeine in sensible proportions. Your brain comprises only 2% of your body mass but needs over 20% of your daily intake of oxygen and nutrients so take plenty of deep breaths in good clean air and eat as smartly as you can.

### 2. Use it or lose it

It's not just your muscles that need exercising, your brain needs stretching and challenging too. Our brain is a living organism that is always able to develop throughout our life - providing you give it the stimulus it needs - because there is no age limit on improving your cognitive ability. If you do any form of exercise it will actually benefit your brain too, as the hippocampus, a brain structure vital to certain types of memory, actually increases in size with exercise. Researchers have found that elderly adults who are more physically fit tend to have bigger hippocampi and better spatial memory than those who are less fit so it pays to keep active.

Exercising your brain means trying new things that do stretch you, not things you are comfortable with. For instance, if you are a crossword addict that's great, but your brain is wired for that now so switch to something else for a while like sudoko or mental arithmetic, maybe learn a new language or take up a hobby. Our brain is designed to be adaptive, it thrives on a challenge so make sure you give it one on a regular basis.

### 3. Be positive.

Try to see the bonuses and blessings that come your way every single day. A negative outlook reduces your life span and being anxious or worried can actually kill off the neurons in your brain, and stop it from producing new ones to replace them. Being positive is one of the best things you can do for your health, and it won't hurt your relationships either.

#### 4 Get going.

They say travel broadens the mind, and it certainly stimulates it. Every time you have to adapt to change then your brain is stimulated into action. Go somewhere different on holiday, take a different route to work or go to a new environment at the weekend. If you always walk the same route, then find a new one and keep your eyes open to take in everything you see and hear.

#### 5. Stay close.

Close and intimate relationships are not just a bonus in our lives, they are vital to our health and wellbeing. Babies who are well fed but have no physical contact with their mother are known to be hampered in their development, because they are not being stimulated by social interaction of any kind. Develop and maintain close relationships and argue, discuss, laugh and share with friends and family in order to keep your brain buzzing

### CREATIVITY CLIPS

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1. Need a creative retreat? Getting away to write or create is a great idea, and there are many dedicated places for you to do that, in fact I recommend them to you all the time, but sometimes you want something unstructured and more of a holiday. I just heard about a lovely place in Italy where you can enjoy a beautiful region, great food, and have space and time to write in and your partner won't get bored either.

If you haven't been to Puglia then you are missing a treat as it is a still unspoilt region in Southern Italy. I was sent details of a lovely one-bedroom apartment in the centro storico (historic centre) of Martina Franca which has a stunning location, overlooking the spectacular Valle d'Itria. It is an ancient city of narrow lanes, quaint houses with wrought iron balconies and lots of baroque architecture. Martina Franca is 30 minutes from the Adriatic and Ionian seas and an hour's drive from either Bari and Brindisi airports. If it sounds like your kind of thing then have a look at the website <http://www.holiday-rentals.co.uk/p414200>

2. Try this... Last time we looked at the power of pong, or getting the aroma of a scene onto the page. This time let's use another of our senses - sound. Take a piece of music that relates to a specific period of your life and as you

listen close your eyes and see the scene it brings up.  
Hear every note of this life soundtrack and let it take  
you back to that time and place. Where is it, who is there  
and what are they doing? Let the music play on repeat if you  
can until you have a very strong sense of that event and then  
just write it out - no stopping, no editing. Leave it a day  
or so and then do it again and see how much more you can get  
this time.



Any questions, comments or criticisms? I love to hear your  
views and your experience, or feedback on any items in the  
newsletter, so do please do contact me at  
<http://www.catalystonline.co.uk>  
or email [anna@creativecatalyst.co.uk](mailto:anna@creativecatalyst.co.uk)