

SundayReview | OPINION

# The End of 'Genius'

By JOSHUA WOLF SHENK JULY 19, 2014

WHERE does creativity come from? For centuries, we've had a clear answer: the lone genius. The idea of the solitary creator is such a common feature of our cultural landscape (as with Newton and the falling apple) that we easily forget it's an idea in the first place.

But the lone genius is a myth that has outlived its usefulness. Fortunately, a more truthful model is emerging: the creative network, as with the crowd-sourced Wikipedia or the writer's room at "The Daily Show" or — the real heart of creativity — the intimate exchange of the creative pair, such as John Lennon and Paul McCartney and myriad other examples with which we've yet to fully reckon.

Historically speaking, locating genius within individuals is a recent enterprise. Before the 16th century, one did not speak of people being geniuses but *having* geniuses. "Genius," explains the Harvard scholar Marjorie Garber, meant "a

tutelary god or spirit given to every person at birth.” Any value that emerged from within a person depended on a potent, unseen force coming from beyond that person.

As late as the Renaissance, people we’d now consider quasi-divine creators were more likely to be seen as deft imitators, making compelling work from familiar materials. Shakespeare, for example, did not typically dream up new ideas for plays but rewrote, adapted and borrowed from the plots, characters and language of previous works. “Romeo and Juliet,” as Mark Rose, a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, notes, is an episode-by-episode dramatization of a poem by Arthur Brooke.

Of course, theater is inherently collaborative. But the Elizabethan stage was more like the modern film industry, where the writer is generally less an auteur than a piece of a machine. Surviving records show three or four or even five playwrights receiving pay for a single production, according to the Columbia professor James Shapiro. The irony is that Shakespeare, whose world serves so well to illustrate a collaborative (or networked) idea about how good work is made, would become the icon of the solo creator.

The big change began with Enlightenment thinkers, who sought to give man a dignified, central place in the world. They made man’s *thinking* the center of their universe and created a profoundly asocial self.

Meanwhile, as the feudal and agrarian gave way to the capitalist and industrial, artists needed to be more than entertaining; they needed to be original, to profit from the sale of their work. In 1710, Britain enacted its first copyright law, establishing authors as the legal owners of their work and giving new cultural currency to the idea of authors as originators.

This is when we start to see the modern use of “genius.” In an essay published in 1711, Joseph Addison cited Shakespeare as a “remarkable instance” of “these great natural geniuses” — those lit up by an inner light and freed from dependence on previous models.

But it was during the Romantic era that “the true cult of the natural genius emerged,” Ms. Garber writes — with Shakespeare as its signal example. He was a

convenient case; so little biographical material existed that his story could be made up.

Paradoxically, the most potent illustration of Shakespeare-as-genius manifested itself as an apparent challenge to it. How could the son of a glover with a provincial education have written so knowingly of kings and queens and faraway lands? It must have been another, dissenters said, with the Earl of Oxford emerging as a favorite candidate. What's remarkable here is the underlying assumption that Shakespeare's plays emerged entirely outside the give-and-take of the theater. Shakespeare doubters, the Cleveland State University scholar James Marino says, "are taking the lone genius idea and doubling down."

Today, the Romantic genius can be seen everywhere. Consider some typical dorm room posters — Freud with his cigar, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the pulpit, Picasso looking wide-eyed at the camera, Einstein sticking out his tongue. These posters often carry a poignant epigraph — "Imagination is more important than knowledge" — but the real message lies in the solitary pose.

In fact, none of these men were alone in the garrets of their minds. Freud developed psychoanalysis in a heated exchange with the physician Wilhelm Fliess, whom Freud called the "godfather" of "The Interpretation of Dreams"; King co-led the civil rights movement with Ralph Abernathy ("My dearest friend and cellmate," King said). Picasso had an overt collaboration with Georges Braque — they made Cubism together — and a rivalry with Henri Matisse so influential that we can fairly call it an adversarial collaboration. Even Einstein, for all his solitude, worked out the theory of relativity in conversation with the engineer Michele Besso, whom he praised as "the best sounding board in Europe."

Now, from disparate directions, a new view of the self has been gathering steam that allows us to begin seeing these old stories as though for the first time. Many factors are at play, not least the rise of the Internet, both for its actual mechanisms that bring people together and for its potency as a metaphor. And the social science of relationships is flourishing, starting with the relational foundations of human development.

Consider what happens when 4-month-olds interact with their mothers: They mimic one another's facial expressions and amplify them. A baby's grin elicits a

mother's smile, which leads the baby to a full-on expression of joy — round mouth, big eyes. “Both parties,” writes the psychiatrist Susan C. Vaughan, “are processing an ongoing stream of stimuli and responding while the stimulation is still occurring.” The implication, Ms. Vaughan argues, is that emotions are “peopled” from the start, centered in an interpersonal exchange rather than in an atomized self.

This is just one piece of an impressive body of research in social psychology and the new field of social neuroscience, which contends that individual agency often pales next to the imperatives of a collective.

The elemental collective, of course, is the pair. Two people are the root of social experience — and of creative work. When the sociologist Michael Farrell looked at movements from French Impressionism to that of the American suffragists, he found that groups created a sense of community, purpose and audience, but that the truly important work ended up happening in pairs, as with Monet and Renoir, and Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In my own study of pairs, I found the same thing — most strikingly with Paul McCartney and John Lennon.

WHY is this? For one thing, given that our psyches take shape through one-on-one exchanges, we're likely set up to interact with a single person more openly and deeply than with any group. The pair is also inherently fluid and flexible. Two people can make their own society. When even one more person is added, roles and power positions harden. This may be good for stability but problematic for creativity. Three legs make a table stand in place. Two legs are made for moving.

Pairs also naturally engage each of the two people involved. In a larger group, an individual may lie low, phone it in. But nobody can hide in a pair.

It's going to take some time to truly accept the significance of pairs in creative life, in part because so many partners, if they do their job well, remain hidden to the outside world. Most Vera Nabokovs never get acknowledged. Partnership is also obscured when the two people have distinct public identities. C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien didn't “collaborate” in the traditional sense, but, as a scholar of their work, Diana Pavlac Glyer, has shown, the influence of each on the other was critical to the work of both.

The pair is the primary creative unit — not just because pairs produce such a staggering amount of work but also because they help us to grasp the concept of dialectical exchange. At its heart, the creative process itself is about a push and pull between two entities, two cultures or traditions, or two people, or even a single person and the voice inside her head. Indeed, thinking itself is a kind of download of dialogue between ourselves and others. And when we listen to creative people describe breakthrough moments that occur when they are alone, they often mention the sensation of having a conversation in their own minds.

This phenomenon is so uncanny that the writer Elizabeth Gilbert has proposed that we return to the myth of the muses to help characterize it. That doesn't mean there literally are “fairies who follow people around rubbing fairy juice on their projects and stuff,” Ms. Gilbert has said. But the core experience described by the muse-creator interaction — that of one entity helping to inspire another — is almost always true.

This raises vital questions. What is the optimal balance between social immersion and creative solitude? Why does interpersonal conflict so often coincide with innovation? Looking at pairs allows us to grapple with these questions, which are as basic to the human experience as the push and pull of love itself. As a culture, we've long been preoccupied with romance. But we should also take seriously something just as important, but long overlooked — creative intimacy.

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A version of this op-ed appears in print on July 20, 2014, on Page SR6 of the New York edition with the headline: The End of 'Genius'.