

Ask for Help:  
How Recognizing our Dependence on Others Improves Creativity

*Your greatest mistake is to act the drama  
as if you were alone. –David Whyte, from the  
poem “Everything is Waiting for You”*

Word Count: 2048

How do you see yourself in relation to the world around you?

Do you see yourself as an autonomous individual, a self-made man or woman propelled onwards and upwards by the strength of your steely will, a person who, of their own volition, has carved out a little place in the world? Do you see yourself as a failure, an inherently flawed nobody with glitchy DNA, a wishy-washy rag doll of a person unable muster up the energy to take out the garbage rotting in the kitchen corner? Or maybe you oscillate between these two extremes, one moment counting your blessings, the next, cursing the stars.

Our existence and our ability to carry out even the simplest of tasks depends upon an infinite number of contingencies, an inconceivable array of causes and conditions, a web of interrelatedness that extends to the outermost reaches of the universe. Our existence, including that tiny but convincing part of us that we call our “autonomous self”, is but the latest of offering in a great tapestry of being, a tapestry reaching backwards and forwards across the taught loom of time, a tapestry that unceasingly reweaves itself into something entirely new.

You didn’t craft your nimble fingers in the womb. You probably didn’t design or build the chair in which you sit, nor create the wood that supplied the frame, nor the fabric that made the cushion. You didn’t invent the language you use, nor the written word and your ability to read these words in front of you and interpret them in a meaningful way. Sure you had to learn how to speak and read, which means that others were there to teach you.

One of the most insidious and difficult challenges for contemporary humans, westerners in particular, and American's even more so, is the cult of the individual. For one reason or another, we have come to see ourselves first and foremost as individuals, then, perhaps, autonomous member of the groups with whom we associate. Whether we are dining with friends or family, or walking along a crowded street, or alone, deep in the wilderness, our tendency is to ascribe a sense of ownership to the events that take place in our life, failing to be cognizant time and time again of this great web of interrelatedness that supports those experiences happening in the first place.

When you feel good about the events unfolding in your life, do you tend to puff up, thinking you're the one who made it all happen? Conversely, when things go awry on your watch, do you blame yourself, or worse, project your disappointments onto others? While these things are happening, are you noticing at the utterly miraculous cosmic stage that makes it all possible, including your overdrawn bank account, your flat tire, or you're embarrassing Freudian slip during dinner with your in-laws?

Whether or not we generally feel good about our lives, or generally bad, so long as we fail to acknowledge a much bigger picture, all roads lead to isolation, and possibly, despair.

Furthermore, despite the obvious benefits resulting from the advancements of modern science and technology, these fields have also left many of us with a reduced, mechanistic view of the world around us. Instead of having a heartfelt connectedness to the world as a living entity that we are inherently a part of, by default, we observe the world as a series of problems that need to be solved, obstacles that need to be overcome, and situations in need of improvement.

But this isn't really the case. The world was whole when you entered it and it will be whole again when you leave.

To counteract such tendencies—the cult of the individual leading to isolation and a reduced, mechanistic view of the world—we need not junk our entire way of doing things. A little adjustment is all that is needed: Start simply by asking for help.

Asking for help doesn't require a radical adjustment to your life. Nor is it defeatist way of doing things, an annoying affront to your desire to complete something all by yourself. It is neither a relinquishment of responsibility nor a surrendering to fatalism. It is simply a down to earth acknowledgement of the way things actually are.

Asking for help begins by acknowledging that you have been, are, and will continued to be helped for the duration of your life span. Not a moment goes by that you don't receive the help you need to survive from the oxygen rich air around you, the rare and precious water that is the signature of our planet, the sunlight you use to see, and the nightfall that encourages you to rest and to dream. Not a moment goes by that you aren't inspired and helped by the contributions of those who came before you. Kings, queens, warriors, magicians, scientists and shamans, lovers and loners alike have left their indelible marks on the world you've inherited. From the harnessing of fire and the etching of the first tools, to invention of the printing press and the combustion engine, to the complexity of a central processing unit and the shaping of precision electronic equipment atom by atom, you benefit from all these creations both natural and human made.

Once you acknowledge this, once you are able to rise above the limiting and delusional game of being a “self-made man or woman”, you can consciously call the world to assist you. Instead of ignoring all that you owe your life to, you embrace your reliance on the world and in

doing so, you embrace the world itself. You bring heart, wisdom, and deepening awareness to where before was simply an unacknowledged, one-sided, narcissistic relationship.

In the same way you benefit from the song of the meadowlark, the sweetness of honey, and the brilliance of dawn, the universe has somehow configured an aspect of itself into the being that is you. And like all the wonderful, interdependent gifts the other arisings bring to the world—the arisings of smooth round river stones that fit in the palm of your hand, the arising of thunderheads, the arising of your first love in grade school, the arisings of Shakespeare and Henry Miller—the universe has fashioned itself into you. Over a 14 billion year stretch, it is now seeing itself through your eyes. It is patiently awaiting your gifts and here to support you in giving them.

Should you have been choosing to plod along as though you lived your life in an isolation tank, how do you begin to ask the world for help? You begin by cultivating personal, heartfelt relationships with the things in your life. Begin with the people around you. You can acknowledge either silently or with unabashed exuberance all they've done to enrich your life. Even the crazy ones (especially the crazy ones!) who come around like rabid animals and leave you house a chaotic mess, acknowledge what you've learned from them, even if it was only the ability to set appropriate boundaries. As for others with whom you feel more comfortable, share the projects that you are working on and issues that are coming up for you and ask them for their reflections and input. You can choose to use it or not, but keep deepening you felt sense of the interdependence, diving headlong into the world through your relatedness with others.

Now look around you at the non-human world. Acknowledge the glasses that allow you to carry your apple juice from room to room, the outlets that power your appliances and reduce drudgery, acknowledge the doorknobs that allow you to adjust the level of privacy you desire,

and the windows that bring in light while blocking out the cold. Acknowledge the supportive ground below your feet and the infinite space above you; how would you ever move about if either one of these was not exactly just so? Acknowledge the sidewalks and roadways, the congested city centers and the wide open country. Acknowledge all these things as expression of an expressive universe revealing itself around you and through you moment after moment. Acknowledge all these things and ask them for their continued support and to further help you in bringing your unique and timely gifts into the world.

The decision to ask for help and the courage to actually do it may seem edgy. It may feel as awkward as it did when you asked someone to dance at the middle school homecoming and your dancing may be equally clumsy. But like any relationship, it takes dedication and practice to develop your felt sense of the ongoing connection; it takes time to cultivate a true sense of intimacy.

The way you ask is not as important as simply doing it. It can be formal or casual, friendly or irreverent, playful or deadly serious. Come as you are. Bring awareness to your physical body, your mood and emotions, and the quality and content of your prevailing thoughts. Whether you're happy, sad, or ambivalent; frightened, curious, or doubtful; sober, elated or scattered, ask from where you are in your present experience. Physical sensations, dreams and imagination, thoughts and emotions never exist in a vacuum. They too are inherently connected to the universe.

You can ask for something general such as, "Will you please help me to unveil my creative potential?" To something more specific such as "will you help me maintain my patience while working with my brother-in-law?" You can ask for insight and guidance on how to begin. You can ask for the strength and conviction to finish what you started.

You can ask the universe as a whole, or something as specific as the oak tree outside your bedroom window. Both lead to the same place; both are expressions of wholeness.

When you receive input from the world—a hint, a hunch, a vision, a situation that unveils the answer to a pending question—acknowledge it, and ask, “what can I do to repay you?” Don’t worry, the universe won’t be asking you for a bag of unmarked bills dropped off in a sketchy location. It won’t ask for the rights to your first born child. In a mutually interdependent universe that is vast, multifarious, and intimately connected, the answers you receive will surprise you. They, too, will be opportunities for further expansion. They, too, will be expressions of wholeness. They, too, will lead you out of your self imposed confines and ever more deeply into the mystery.

If you are feeling guilty or selfish in asking, or feel awkward or embarrassed, if it seems, perhaps, beneath you to ask a mushroom or a rock outcropping for your help, then you would *really* benefit in asking. It takes a lot of courage to surrender the belief that all of us humans are the ultimate expression of life on this planet.

Ask for help!

Ask people. Ask plants. Ask animals. Ask spirit. Most importantly ask those people, places, and things that are most significant to you. They are significant to you because you already have a profound and intimate relationship. Ask basic elements, raw materials, manufactured goods, and natural phenomena to assist you. Ask for help from your ancestors and your ancestor’s ancestors. Ask for help from the luminous present. Ask for help with the inevitable future.

The next time you find yourself puffing up your chest with self righteousness or collapsing in self defeat, the next time you feel the desire to fix something, to make it somehow

better, expand your sense of awareness, let it envelop the room, the building, the city, indeed the entire planet. Let your own sense of self merge with the universe that has always been here to support you and from that place, ask, “What am I, a child of the universe, experiencing right now? What is this experience here to teach me?” Pause, and then act, if that’s what feels right.

When we ask for help, we build a bridge between self and other; we foster the sense of connectedness with all that surrounds us. When we ask for help, we cast away despair by deepen our connections with our surroundings. We begin to experience the world in a whole new way.

We begin to experience our lives as a vibrant, dynamic, interdependent web of co-creation that is always unfolding anew.

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