section **three**

THE ARTISTIC DISCIPLINES

Chapter six

Proactivity

PROACTIVITY IS CENTRAL T0 CREATIVITY. It is the engine of productivity and creative energy. This chapter examines why proactivity is so important and what factors typically undermine it. These include genetic disposition (instinctual fear) and psychological make-up (usually formed with or without parents by the age of seven) and the social environment into which an individual is born. Vignettes are taken from the lives of Steve Jobs, Marvin Gaye, Sting and James Taylor.

> Frodo: I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.
>
> Gandalf: So do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.
>
> THE LORD OF THE RINGS, J.R.R TOLKIEN[1]

Proactivity is the thought pattern of resolve that precedes action itself. It is a metaphor for action, a posture of intent: the signature of those who step up and seek out opportunities rather than those who react instinctively to incoming traffic. While most artists possess this precursory gift, equally there is little doubt that proactivity is one of the crucial elements that make up the entrepreneurial mindset. Stephen Covey places this as the first of his seven habits of highly effective people.[2] Possibly the easiest way to demonstrate this mindset is to juxtapose the language of reactivity and proactivity. An example would be "There is nothing I can do here" versus "Here I can make a difference". The former suggests a defensive and, sometimes, victim orientation. The latter demonstrates an offensive, purposeful approach.

Inevitably, the problem in working out what to do is that, despite our best proactive intentions, somewhere down the line we wind up doing reactive, or just plain stupid stuff. This is either because life can spring nasty surprises on us that we have little or no control over, or because of the damage to the inner child as discussed earlier, or a combination of the two. Here we find ourselves caught in a web of provocation, whiplashing into thoughtless actions that we would seldom purposefully undertake. We enter a space of the lower shrunken self, a place where the unconscious

takes control. By way of example, imagine a typical family get-together – a birthday celebration or Christmas party. This is an event that you've looked forward to for a while - close family to see, old friends to catch up with. Now imagine one particular person at this event. Usually there is just one, though there could be more. What makes this individual special is that he or she has a remarkable ability to wind you up and unravel you with one casual comment. This comment is usually part of a broader behavioural narrative, the repeat of an earlier scene, conjuring a primal dynamic that places you on the edge of where your shadow meets the light. It is something you've witnessed and experienced many times before. It is certainly not new if and when this remark is made, either you can face up and push through the painful feelings in the most mature, grown-up way that you can, or you can spin out and regress, becoming a wounded four-year-old child, yet again. The comment that drives you to this edge is most certainly connected to your own vulnerability - something like "So who invited you?" or "You've got fat!'" It might be just a condescending look or perhaps a complete lack of eye contact, a denial of your presence. Usually these actions or non-actions have the ability to undo you completely, leaving you incapable of being yourself as you retreat, wounded, to the margins of your interior world. This renders the long-awaited event an unpleasant one. You might want to leave. You might feel that you never want to return. How often has this kind of scene played itself out? Too many times, you might reply.

In the light of these predictable events, imagine what, with a proactive intent, you could do to change your response once the dreaded comment has been made. How best could you avoid the red mist of recoil? What response could you manufacture so that you are in control of the proceedings as they unfurl? No matter how badly you are hurting, how best could you determine the outcome of this interaction? This celebration that you've looked forward to for so long: how could you make it one that works for you, turning it into a genuinely happy occasion?

Given this challenge, some might ask whether it might be wiser to act before the dreaded comment has been made, to deal pre-emptively with the offending individual, if you will. This is a wonderful way to be proactive because you control and wield your power before someone tries to take it away from you. However the events play themselves out, the aim here is to concentrate on getting ahead of your emotions by managing the gap between the stimulus and response. The key is to bring the response upfront, making it less instinctual and more thoughtful, to make you the boss of your own feelings. There's a great anecdote of how the touring British Lions rugby team of 1974 dealt with the typically confrontational and physical Springboks – "by getting their retaliation in first", as the story goes. According to the Lions captain, Willie John McBride, a line-out code was given, "99". This was an immediate

call to arms, upon which the entire team climbed into the hapless Springboks. The thinking here was that the referee would not send off the entire touring 15 if they were caught fighting, and so it proved. None of the South Africans saw it coming and, once the brawl had played itself out, the Lions had left no doubt in anyone's mind that they would not be intimidated. Having dealt with the legendary threat of the Springbok forwards, the Lions went on to annihilate the Springboks 3-0, the final test being drawn. The key point of learning from this "retaliation first" principle is that you become the key creator of the event. You do not allow circumstances to impinge upon you. You do not allow them to dictate your actions.

Backing up from these opening remarks, words from T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" are particularly pertinent here: "Between the conception/ And the creation / Between the emotion/ And the response/ Falls the Shadow."[3] Eliot's key point is that that which we conceive of is typically severed from the creative act by the shadow of suppressed self, thereby stifling creation before it can begin. Similarly, that which rises as emotion is obliterated by shadow before we can fully and properly respond. Eliot understood well the deleterious work of shadow and the damage it can inflict on our ability to step out and lead creative, proactive lives.

The damaging effect of shadow

The source of this kind of regressive behaviour, where the shadow closes us down and leaves us as stripped-down versions of our true selves, can generally be attributed to three different dynamics and these are worth reflecting on. The first is our psychic inheritance, that which we inherit from our families and primary caregivers as we grow up. The second is our DNA, that which makes us intrinsically human. The third source of damage comes from contemporary society.

The primary source of our shadow affliction is usually fuelled by our psychological inheritance. This is inevitably the product of domestic pathologies rooted deep in our formative years. I know very few adults who don't carry a certain amount of baggage from the past. Many people I know were told, as children, that they weren't good enough, or weren't doing the right things. They did too little or too much. They internalised some kind of blame when their parents fought, when they drank, when they never came home, when they divorced. Damage seems to be variously incurred. Some people hurt more than others. Some recover quickly. Others take decades to heal. I often joke about the big, green, shiny apples we buy in top-end supermarkets. We are not these apples, I tell my students. We are the banged-up, bruised and battered specimens found at the bottom of the discarded box at the back of the shop. The sooner we accept this reality, the sooner we can move on. It's not easy for any artist or entrepreneur to accept this, but they must and they do.

Pathologies of abandonment are found among many great artists. Divorce, alcoholism, absent fathers - these family symptoms are common to many of those who challenge authority and the prevailing power dynamic. For reasons already analysed, the abandoned and rejected are typically those who will strike out on their own, seeking new ways of doing things. Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, is a case in point. Not many are aware that Jobs suffered terribly as a youngster from feelings of abandonment, due to being put up for adoption. Said Greg Calhoun, a college friend: "Steve talked to me a lot about being abandoned and the pain that caused ... It made him independent. He followed the beat of a different drummer, and that came from being in a different world than he was born into ... The primal scream and the mucusless diets, he was trying to cleanse himself and get deeper into his frustration about his birth. He told me he was deeply angry about the fact that he had been given up."[4] His first serious girlfriend, Chrisann Brennan, described him as a man "full of broken glass". She conceived a child with Jobs, who subsequently abandoned both her and his newborn child. Looking back, Brennan remarked: "He who is abandoned is an abandoner."[5]

For many entrepreneurs and artists, "father issues" are the trigger point. Marvin Gaye, the Motown star and recorder of the critical '70s soul albums What's Going On and Let's Get It On, probably had the worst deal in this respect. In l984, following a sustained period of domestic argument, he was shot in cold blood by his father, Marvin Gay, Snr. Gaye was one day short of 45. Such was the acrimony between him and his father that, when his Motown career took off in the '60s, Marvin Jnr added an "e" to his surname to distance himself from his father (and dispel any uncertainty as to his sexuality). According to his sister, from the age of seven Gaye suffered his father's regular and brutal whippings. Looking back on his childhood, Gaye described his son-to-father experience as "living with a king, a very peculiar, changeable, cruel and all powerful king". Had his mother not encouraged his singing, Gaye believed he'd have been a case for child suicide. As an adult, he suffered relentless bouts of depression, resorting to cocaine abuse and attempting suicide twice: in the late '60s and again in the '70s. In an interview in 1983, Gaye confirmed that he had bipolar mood disorder. During periods of depression, he explained, he didn't feel as if he was loved, and he didn't feel love. "I felt useless," he said.[6]

Sting, former Police frontman and an artist in his own right, also appears to have struggled with his father. Interviewed by Time in 2011, he spoke of his father's recent death. "My dad and I had the same hands. I hadn't really noticed that until he was on his deathbed, and I mentioned it. And he said, 'You used your hands better than I did.' My dad was a milkman. And I realized that was probably the first compliment he'd ever paid me, and that was kind of devastating."[7] Enough said.

The second source of shadow stems from our actual genetic make-up and includes instinctive pre-coded responses to various environmental stimuli. These responses are deeply imprinted within our genes and we can do very little about them. These include the typical “fight or flight” or “freeze and play dead” responses to danger. Such instantaneous trigger responses stand in contrast to those that enable us to make rational decisions based on some kind of planning and thought. Other responses might include a sense of panic when held under water or a fear of heights, spiders, snakes and so on. When faced with an emergency or some potentially life-threatening circumstance - such as a gun being held to your head in a hijack situation - programmed cues will trigger a pre-programmed set of options over which we, cognitively, have little or no control. These reactive impulses are derived from evolutionary processes that are thousands and thousands of years old. Thus we just “act out” by either lashing out, fleeing or playing dead.

Bruce Springsteen spent decades of painful introspection trying to unravel the moods that afflicted him. While therapy indicated that much of his inner trauma could be pinned down to events that occurred in his childhood, specifically relating to his father, he has acknowledged that this is not the full story and that, while insight into the parental dynamic has given him a sense of understanding, it has not guaranteed him peace. Just when he is not expecting it, when he's in a particularly good space, his mood will darken for no apparent reason. “You go through periods of being good, then something stimulates it,” he said.[8] It could be the clock or some random memory. Springsteen realised that the incessant patterning of such mood swings was part of his physiological script, a script over which he had limited control. “You're going along fine, and then boom, it hits you,” he observed. “Things that just come from way down in the well. Completely noncausal, but it's part of your DNA, part of the way your body cycles.”[9]

Similarly, James Taylor spoke about the mismatch he feels between his prehistoric instincts and a contemporary society in which these instincts are outmoded. This he described as a “difficulty being in my own skin”: a problem of feeling alien and being ill-equipped to cope with the stresses of modern-day existence. “1 think human life is not normal. We were evolved, physiologically perhaps, to a state that people lived in 5000 years ago, maybe. But I think today we're always trying to play catch-up with the changes we make to our environment. We have so much capacity to change what we live in. There's no way to call it normal - or to say it's where we should be. It would be fine if I'd been a Scandinavian 5000 years ago. It would have matched my condition,” he said. Reflecting on the impact of this prehistoric dynamic on how he behaved as a young teenager, Taylor remarked: “Living in human society (today) I just ran into trouble, and I think everybody does

to a greater or lesser extent."[10] How right he is. Many of our automatic, instinctual responses have no place in society today; they are simply vestiges of another time, inherited responses from a prehistoric epoch. While these ancient triggers, such as the fight, flight and freeze responses, might once have assisted us in getting out of trouble fast, today they are more of a hindrance and can actually serve to sever us from our real intent.

The third source of damage is inflicted by society in general. In South Africa one need look no further than the damage wrought by the apartheid ideology. Most South Africans of European descent will struggle to appreciate just what it must have felt like for Africans to be told that, because of their skin colour, they were not good enough, that they were second-rate citizens and that certain schools, suburbs, jobs, beaches and other aspects of life were forbidden to them. This level of institutional toxicity has had untold effects on many of those subjected to it. It is not surprising that so many of us in South Africa today lack the belief in our own worth - in our ability to make independent judgements of our creative worth. Speaking about the challenges facing black South Africans, more than 30 years ago struggle giant Steve Biko observed: "Any changes which arc to come can only come as a result of a programme worked out by black people. And for black people to be able to work out a programme, they need to defeat the main element working against them - this being a psychological feeling of inferiority."[11] As with much of Africa still grappling with the issues of the past, the redress of South Africa's wounded psyche will take decades to heal, and this only with care, education, patience and love.

Paradoxical as it may sound, one of the most remarkable traits of all creators is the ability to use this original toxicity- whether its roots are genetic, psychological or social - to actually fuel the creative process. But this is a fundamental truth of the life-artist. Once absorbed, acknowledged and faced down, it is often this original toxicity that ends up driving us to compete, to create, to master and to endure. It is this toxicity which, when integrated within us (and not pushed away), gives us the power to create and thrive as never before. Catharsis and art are close cousins. Seemingly, unresolved pain is the source of great art. In his biography on Jobs, Walter Isaacson confirmed the action orientation of the Apple founder. Jobs, wrote Isaacson, "reflected philosophically on audiences in general and on his own in particular, asserting that most people do not want a challenge, do not want to participate, but simply want something done to them". He added: "There would always be some 15 per cent, though, who desired something more and were prepared to search it out; herein lay the response to art."[12]

Having already described the factors that debilitate the inclination towards action, it should be clear that all artists do ultimately respond with action to produce

art. The process is never easy and, usually, there is very little in material return. There are ulterior motives at play, as we shall see.

For now it might be useful to sketch out a number of subroutines that emerge as a function of a proactive orientation.

1. Adapt your life. While you might see the world as inherently weird, you need to use what you have to make the best of it. You can't curl up your toes and bemoan your existence. Some artists, of course, are prone to histrionics but little will ever come of it. Great art comes from action. You therefore have to make the difference yourself. There's a wonderful French term that describes this incremental day-by-day DIY difference-making: bricolage. The term, coined by the theorist Claude Levi-Strauss in the '60s, means making do with what you have at hand[13] to address existing problems and opportunities. Jackson Pollock the abstract painter is a case in point. He was self-taught and used dripping sticks and basting brushes to apply vast amounts of viscous paint to huge canvasses rolled out across his studio floor. As he "bricolaged" his way into further abstraction, the greater grew his vision and the possibilities of his newly developing technique. It is a common language for many, many artists. Singer-songwriter and serial entrepreneur Neil Young is a great proponent of this form of creative exploration. Musing on why the processes of artists, engineers and designers have always held such fascination for him, Young reckoned that it was because, at the start of any project, he'd never been sure whether an idea would actually work. "I love to watch and try to guide what is happening, expanding the goals and reach of a project as it unfolds," he says. Though some people believe that predictive, long-range planning is the proper way to go about projects, Young disagrees. Tinkering phase by phase is the way to go, he maintained. "Each tangent offers new possibilities for exploration and discovery. A job is never finished. It just reaches a stage where it can be left on its own for a while."[14]

2. Learn from your mistakes. Everyone makes mistakes, and it is important to be open to correction. Such openness implies an ongoing awareness of the possibilities of failure and a view that there is always something to be learnt from not getting it quite right. Theorists call this "Action Learning"[15] - an orientation that believes learning should occur through an ongoing questioning of assumptions and constructs that bind our modes of practice. Plans always need to be revised since very little ever goes according to plan. Revision is ongoing. So, when things go wrong, the questions must always turn inwards to examine whether any governing practices or policies require adjustment, or even complete

revision. Critically, we need to understand that failure should be tolerated, even welcomed. Within some businesses, there is a built-in tolerance of failure. So, when running a string of nine or ten entrepreneurial ventures, we understand that some, even most, will inevitably fail. This is the view of the venture capitalist: that, while each venture is well considered, it is unlikely that every bet will pay off. Evolutionary theory supports this view. Everything is run on risk. Only the lucky and the strongest survive. Sometimes survival and success has more to do with luck than strength, and we will examine the role of luck later. Strong companies also fail. There is no disgrace in failure. It is a fact of life, a natural course of events. No one can predict failure, just as no one can predict success. Google is well known for this orientation; and certainly no one predicted the success of Google, let alone Facebook, let alone the computer, the laser beam or the internet. No one saw these game-changers coming. Randomness is a fact of life.[16] Success, as 2002 Nobel Prize-winning behavioural economist Daniel Kahneman suggests, is merely an equation: luck plus ability.[17] As you will read in a later chapter, we need ability but we also need luck. If anything, the view should be: if you're going to fail, fail fast. Don't hang on. Rather move on. If it takes nine failures to make one success, move through those nine as fast as possible. Get failure out of the way.

3. Do it yourself. Adapting your life as you go means not waiting for others to fix it for you. You need to get on and do it yourself. Sal Khan, founder and director of the Khan Academy, an online education platform, endorses this view. Since its inception in 2006, the academy has produced more than 6500 video tutorials, concentrating initially on maths and science. Khan says that the best piece of advice he's been given, the insight that's driven him the most is: just keep moving. The imperative is not to ask questions, to over-analyse or prognosticate. It is just to keep swimming. Says Khan: “Before I make a video for Khan Academy, I don't think, Let me go talk to some people and do focus groups. Obviously you have to have some learning, but if it's ruining the tempo of activity, you have to rethink things. At the end of the day, what matters is whether your product works and whether people like it.”[18]

   The quicker you learn to act proactively and to do it yourself rather than rely on others, the faster things will happen. Hence follows the axiom: if you want something done, give it to a busy person. That means you! Without denigratingnthe importance of teamwork and interdependence, let us recognise these for what they are: managerial practices (mostly employed in organisational life) which usually follow rather than precede the development of original thought.

While there is much skill required in drawing out the collective creative best from any organisation, in reality, great ideas do not usually emerge from organisational life. There are exceptions of course - witness Apple, Google and 3M.

Organisations aside, parents can prove critical in fostering in their children a sense of independence and enquiry. Richard Branson, for example, though severely dyslexic, scarcely literate by the age of eight and completely innumerate, came from a happy and secure family background. His mother, Eve, is reported to have encouraged her children to be self-reliant and accountable, and to take charge of their own destinies rather than demurring to others. This seemed to have worked. One tale is told of how, on a drive home from a visit to his grandparents, she asked her then four-year-old son Richard to get out of the car and try to find his way home. The farmhouse where they were staying was not too far away, but Richard still got lost, eventually arriving at a neighbouring farm. All worked out well in the end, of course.[19]

4. You have only one chance. While not always true, for some opportunities will recur, the general imperative is to get on with it because you seldom get more than one shot. In a hyper-competitive world, you cannot afford to sit back and wait for the next best thing. Some windows of opportunity close after a very short span of time. For some reason it is part of human fallibility to underestimate the passage of time. Many people see time as something that is inexhaustible, like a river, a resource that is ongoing, easily acquired. The truth is that time is not like that. The biblical perspective, that there is a season for everything, is wise counsel for the potentially creative person who prefers to procrastinate and is easily deflected into more pleasurable pursuits. One important example is the orientation of young men and women still in their twenties and early thirties who seldom clearly grasp what they need to accomplish in order to move successfully into the next phase of their lives. While not wishing to oversimplify or sound glib, the key quests of young adults are (1) to find out what it is they were born to do - in other words, breaking into a career path that gives them purpose and meaning - and (2) to find a life partner. Neither of these tasks is easy, and each requires much insight and self-knowledge. If they are not successfully negotiated, they will discover, later in life, that they're in a place, with a person or in a condition from which it becomes increasingly difficult to extricate themselves. Easy money or work options, too much drinking or drugging, or associating with inappropriate partners can leave them in a weak life position. And yet all too often young people squander their days on frivolous pursuits, not knowing what they are doing or are meant to be doing. In other words, they default into their lives instead of proactively seeking

out that which they hold to be important. Too many wrong forks in the road can lead to life disaster.

I have a friend who believes that, by the age of 30, you need to know who you are and where you are going; from 30 to 40 you need to go there; from the age of 40 to 50 you need to make some money doing this; from 50 to 60 you need to keep on doing this and earning money but using your experience to work less; and, from 60 to 70, be able to kick back and enjoy the fruits of your labours because from 70 to 80 life becomes a lottery.

Having said this let me repeat that while a decade-worth of failure can deliver bitter lessons down the road - lessons best avoided - these lessons can spark a certain level of consciousness. And consciousness is the axe blade of proactivity. It can and should drive intent.

The great American Existential author Paul Bowles had no belief in God and saw life as a brief and meaningless sojourn. On this sterile promontory, he acknowledged (with a sense of ennui) just how finite our lives actually are. And yet within this limited span, he also noted how deluded we are with the sense of endless possibility. In The Sheltering Sky, he wrote:

> Death is always on the way, but the fact that you don't know when it will arrive seems to take away from the finiteness of life. It's that terrible precision we hate so much. Because we don't know when we will die, we get to think of life as an inexhaustible well. Yet everything happens only a certain number of times, and a very small number, really. How many more times will you remember a certain afternoon of your childhood, some afternoon that's so deeply a part of your being that you can't even conceive of your life without it? Perhaps four or five times more. Perhaps not even that. How many more times will you watch the full moon rise? Perhaps twenty. And yet it all seems limitless.[20]

This quote is perhaps familiar to some; and to many it may send a chill of regret at the frittering away of our days. A warmer quote, but one which, I feel, makes the same point, is drawn from A Handful of Summers, the memoir of '60s South African tennis player Gordon Forbes.

> Go back down the years
> And recall if you can
> All the warm temperate times;
> You may find with surprise

That they're all squeezed in
To a headful of thoughts
And a handful of summers.[21]

Whichever way you look at it, those who maintain a passive view of life and hold that, if we kick around for long enough, something worthwhile is bound to arrive, tend to miss the point. There are possibilities out there for sure but the proactive tend to be the ones who make these possibilities happen. Fatalistic passivity is a disposition given to those who don't value what they have, what they can do or could make of themselves. By the time they wake up it's usually too late. As Paul Simon once pointedly wrote in the lyrics of "Rene and Georgette Magritte With Their Dog After the War", decades will "[glide] by like Indians". The passage *of* time is so silent, so insidious, you just won't notice until it's too late.

Writing, for example, does not happen simply by dreaming up stories and thinking up spectacular plots and schemes. While such dreams are critical, they are only realised through hard graft and hours of application. Those who pick up this thread tend to understand the dictum, carpe diem, "seize the day". While we shall later consider the question of how much work is actually required, the point to grasp here is this critical posture of intent: one of constantly moving outwards, of spying out new territories of possibility and nurturing these lands to a point of fruition. Nothing can happen without this proactive intent. Nothing.

Chapter Summary

1. As demonstrated through anecdotes from the lives of artists such as Sting, Steve Jobs and Marvin Gaye, this chapter illustrates the powerful role of proactivity. Proactivity is, after all, what spurs us on to creative pursuit. Without it nothing can happen.
2. Three powerful factors can, however, work to neuter proactivity, namely genetics, one's psychological make up and the social milieu into which one is born.
3. Through genetics one inherits certain instinctual traits, phobias and the Like. Such traits can also manifest through adverse developments within the psyche, a process that is mostly completed by the time one reaches the age of seven. The role of one's environment can also prove important, with children born in California, for example, having a far higher chance of creative success than those born in Central Africa.

SECTION THREE

CHAPTER SIX – Proactivity

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