

Dream Job

TO THE UNINITIATED, THE PAGES OF AN ACTUARIAL magazine might seem an odd place to find a mediation on the mysteries of creativity. But in this issue of *Contingencies* we have two of them.

What do actuaries have to do with creativity? Not being one myself, I can't speak to it as a job requirement. And I can certainly understand the red flags that might spring up around the notion of "creative numbers." But there isn't a profession worth its salt that doesn't value creativity in some form. And when actuaries turn their professional skills to other pursuits—writing for a magazine, for instance—it's a requirement.

And as much a mystery to them as to everybody else.

In this issue's "End Paper," columnist Richard Zatorski muses on the power of laziness. (Zatorski himself is so lazy, his "Hidden World of Actuaries" in last year's January issue won a silver SNAP award from the Society of National Association Publications.) Laziness isn't a quality much prized by the business world, but it's not uncommon to hear writers, artists, musicians, and other creative types bragging about how lazy they are.

Of course, as Zatorski correctly surmises, they don't actually mean lazy. Not in the conventional, pejorative sense, anyway. Nor is it exactly "waiting for inspiration to strike"—something you never hear creative people say seriously.

No, this laziness is more like multitasking. Programs running behind programs. Even if the fingers aren't actually typing any words, that doesn't mean there isn't work going on. It's simmering. Percolating. Always humming along in the background, like Muzak in the grocery store.

But from the outside, where the rest of the world sits, it looks an awful lot like laziness. It looks like . . . well, like just staring at the computer screen.

Which is where we find humor columnist Tom Bakos, trying to make the most of those mesmerizing moments with his screensaver. Like Rich Zatorski, he's trying to explain—and perhaps justify—the lack of external evidence of the creative process.

Maybe it's happened to you. You're sitting there, feet up on the desk, chair tilted back, pursuing that firefly of an idea that keeps winking at you from the darkness but won't let you catch it. You haven't touched the keyboard in what seems like years, and the screensaver has become the perfect mirror image of what's going on in your mind.

Somebody walks by, and what do they see?

They see somebody who's out to lunch. Wool gathering. Coasting. Zoning. Maybe even tossing a few free throws at the wastebasket, or quilling the ceiling tiles with No. 2s.

Whatever they see, it sure doesn't look like anybody's idea of actual work.

And yet, somehow, the work gets done; the memo gets written; the strategy gets mapped; the sentence gets crafted; the same old formula leads in an unexpected and exciting new direction. And it all comes from those moments of fertile inattention that, in the bottom-line world of modern business, are so difficult to justify.

The creative process itself is almost impossible to quantify—until it produces results. And even then, the process—which is of but not the same as the product—remains a mystery. ●



EDITOR

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