





THE CREATIVE LEADER

There is much truth to the belief that creation everywhere displays to us vestiges of the Trinity. And because these vestiges are most clearly evident in “humanity,” so that “human beings” may even be called “the image of the Trinity,” “humanity” is driven from within to search out these vestiges.

**Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation***

May I submit that if you deny your creativity, you suggest a deficiency in God’s creation. The idea that only a gifted minority of human beings are creative is one of the most persistent and pernicious myths there is. It is totally false. Yet it dies with great difficulty.

**Howard Hendricks, *Color Outside the Lines***

I have nothing to fear from other worldviews, because mine is bigger than all the others, containing their truths and filling in their blind spots. The Christian imagination is vaster than those that derive from narrow human frames of reference. The Christian imagination comprehends both the depths of human wretchedness and the heights of human greatness, the whole range of emotions from agony to joy, despair to ecstasy, the created universe in all of its order and its mystery. “All things are yours”! Because “you are Christ’s”! Imagine that.

**Gene Edward Veith Jr. and Matthew P. Ristuccia,  
*Imagination Redeemed***

Unlike any other creature on this planet, human beings can learn and understand, without having experienced. They can think themselves into other people’s places. . . . We do not need magic to transform the world, we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already: we have the power to imagine better.

**J. K. Rowling, “The Fringe Benefits of Failure,  
and the Importance of Imagination”**

Eternal truths will be neither true nor eternal unless they have fresh meaning for every new social situation.

**Franklin D. Roosevelt, convocation address,  
University of Pennsylvania, September 1940**



2

## THE CREATIVE LEADER

IMAGINING THE WAY FORWARD

**Summary:** *You can be a person of deep conviction but still have no direction. In order to move forward, leaders need imagination to see the connections between their unchanging convictions and life in an ever-changing world. Creative leaders imagine the way forward. That's why we need God. God is the Creator. He has the best imagination. He created everything out of nothing at all. He sees the way forward through chaos and disorder like no one else. With God on our side, we see a brighter future for the communities where we lead, and we inspire others to join us as we pursue that God-given vision.*

What do you do when chaos breaks loose in a church board meeting? Are you tempted to quit or despair? Where do your emotions go when you're trying to navigate a budget crisis? How about when your small group ministry has gone sideways? In those moments of crisis, it's

important to remember that the best things in life rise from the ashes of chaos and disorder.

Leaders see the dissonance between their convictions and reality. But the best leaders don't stop there. Even when they reach rock bottom, the best leaders are able to hold on to hope that beauty can rise. I recently heard Kevin Cawley, lead pastor of Redeemer Fellowship, Kansas City, say, "Creativity is born out of the gap between where things are and where they should be."<sup>1</sup> Creative leaders aren't delusional about the pain in their world, but they aren't stymied by it. They see trouble as opportunity. Creative leaders imagine the way forward. They see how their unchanging convictions can be worked out in an ever-changing world. Leadership scholar James MacGregor Burns says it this way: "At its simplest, creative leadership begins when a person imagines a state of affairs not presently existing."<sup>2</sup>



## **Leadership Vision 2: The Creative Leader**

Creative leaders imagine the way forward.



When I think about imagination and creativity, I think about Steve Jobs, and I'm not alone. Avi Dan, a contributor to *Forbes*, writes, "To my mind, in the past 25 years no other company, not even Nike or Disney, has been as brilliantly and consistently creative as Apple."<sup>3</sup> In memorializing Jobs, Oracle founder and CEO, Larry Ellison, told *CBS This Morning* that Jobs was his "best friend for twenty-five years. He was brilliant. He was our Edison. He was our Picasso."<sup>4</sup>

Ellison's comparison of Jobs to Picasso is instructive. Picasso didn't do conventional art. Like Jobs, Picasso innovated and deviated from the norms of his day. Jobs was fond of the mantra "Good artists copy; great artists steal."<sup>5</sup> To copy is to do something exactly like somebody else. A good painter can copy, but that's not true creativity. Successful

“stealing” is taking something and making it yours. “Stealing”—in the sense that Jobs was using the term—is when you take something and change it so much that it looks like it belongs to you.

Picasso and Jobs “stole” ideas in this good way—building on earlier and outside experiences to create radical innovations. Picasso blended influences from the ancient Iberian style and African style characters in order to create a new style of art—cubism. Jobs applied the very same creative process to revolutionize the field of computers. Long before his years at Apple, Jobs took a calligraphy course at Reed College because he enjoyed the beauty of art. “Reed College at that time offered perhaps the best calligraphy instruction in the country,” Jobs told Stanford graduates in 2005:

I learned about serif and san serif typefaces, about varying the amount of space between different letter combinations, about what makes great typography great. It was beautiful, historical, artistically subtle in a way that science can’t capture, and I found it fascinating. . . . Ten years later, when we were designing the first Macintosh computer, it all came back to me. And we designed it all into the Mac. It was the first computer with beautiful typography.<sup>6</sup>

Jobs didn’t walk passively through life. He was alert, making connections. He explains:

Creativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn’t really do it. They just saw something. It seemed obvious to them after a while. That’s because they were able to connect experiences they’ve had and synthesize new things.<sup>7</sup>

*Forbes* contributor Carmine Gallo writes that when he was conducting his research for a book on the Apple Store retail model, he was surprised to learn that the inspiration for the Apple Store came directly from the Ritz-Carlton.

Steve Jobs asked, “What can we learn from the hospitality industry and apply it to retail?” The next time you walk into an Apple Store,

you might want to notice the similarities. A “concierge” greets you at the door. You’ll even find a bar at the back of the store—the Genius bar doesn’t dispense alcohol like a hotel bar; it dispenses advice instead. A “good artist” would have copied another successful retail model. Steve Jobs, a “great artist,” stole an idea from a completely different field.<sup>8</sup>

Leadership requires us to see beyond what’s in front of us. In the spring of 2011, I sat on the front porch of our 930 Art Center building with a group of men after an elder meeting. I began to outline for them a creative vision for a sermon series on grace for the following fall. I talked to them about a new acrostic for the Reformed doctrines of grace—PROOF.<sup>9</sup> The premise of PROOF is that God’s grace gives us a foundation on which to stand but, like strong drink, also makes us stagger in amazement. Jared Kennedy, our Pastor of Families at Sojourn Community Church, sat with us and took it in. A few weeks later, he left on a family trip to Disney World and began “stealing” PROOF:

On the classic *Pirates of the Caribbean* boat ride, the wax pirates are depicted in all of their buccaneer glory—drunk, burning villages, killing one another, stealing and carrying off women. It’s not exactly the vision of manhood a pastor of families typically wants to put before his children. My young girls were a bit terrified. But there were young boys the same age celebrating these evil rum-guzzling scallywags. You can judge them *and* Disney if you want, but I saw something beautiful in it. In that moment, I sensed God say, “And that’s how I’ve accepted you.” I made an immediate connection to grace—grace enough to save a scallywag. I got up early the next morning and grabbed my journal. I wrote the words: “PROOF Pirates—grace enough to save a scallywag” at the top of the page and started doodling images to teach it below. We’d use a treasure map to teach about God’s sovereign plan and a skeleton to teach about how God makes dead men walk. We’d talk about how Jesus is the anchor who keeps us forever. By that August sermon series, our children’s ministry team hung a Jolly Roger in the children’s hallway and put together a children’s book / family devotional and a five-day curriculum.<sup>10</sup>

What's true about PROOF Pirates and Apple is that both Jared and Jobs are thieves. Their creation is not out of nothing. Jared stole PROOF from me. He stole the pirates from Walt Disney. Like Jobs with the Ritz-Carlton, Jared made connections and then inspired a team to build something that wasn't there before.

### The Creative Process

The creative process is simple. Jobs teaches us that it begins with having *diverse experiences*, that is, getting out into and exploring the remarkable diversity of God's world. In order to be creative, I need the museum and I need the mountains. The choreographer Twyla Tharp teaches us, "Reading, conversation, environment, culture, heroes, mentors, nature—all are lottery tickets for creativity."<sup>11</sup> Tina Seelig, professor of creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship at Stanford, says it simply: "Your knowledge provides the fuel for your imagination."<sup>12</sup> The next step, according to creative thinkers Eric Liu and Scott Noppe-Brandon, is *imagination*. They define imagination simply as "the capacity to conceive of *what is not*—something that, as far as we know, does not exist; or something that may exist but we simply cannot perceive."<sup>13</sup> Imagination is making connections between the experiences you've had and then seeing something that wasn't there before. J. K. Rowling says, "Imagination is . . . the uniquely human capacity to envision that which is not and therefore the fount of all invention and innovation."<sup>14</sup>

But imagination alone isn't creativity. Creativity is imagination applied.<sup>15</sup> Imagination is dreaming. It's a child picturing a tree with



#### What Is Imagination?

Imagination is the capacity people have to envision that which is not. It involves connecting experiences you've had in such a way that you see something that wasn't there before.



ostrich legs. Imagination is a pastor dreaming about a second service. For imagination to become creativity, it must be worked out. A child begins to create when she draws that tree with ostrich legs. Creativity involves that pastor creating the structures necessary to have that second service. Anne Kreamer writes, “Creativity requires both divergent thinking (the generation of fresh ideas) combined with convergent thinking (channeling those ideas into a practical solution).”<sup>16</sup> Imagination is MacGyver thinking up a way out of his latest jam. Creativity is grabbing the duct tape and disassembling a lighter.



### **Creativity**

Creativity, simply put, is imagination applied.

The creative process involves . . .

Instruction → Integration → Improvisation



Creativity develops in three stages. We need basic *instruction* first. If someone’s learning music, they first need to learn the keys, the notes, and the scales. Instruction in the basics gives a foundation for future learning. I teach my son about God’s world and God’s Word using a catechism. It gives him a basic language and worldview for future growth in biblical living.

The second stage is *integration*—making connections. With practice, a young musician moves beyond playing scales to reading music fluently. He doesn’t have to stop and think anymore about where to put his fingers on the keys. We see this in biblical learning when a child begins to apply the truths he sees in the Scriptures or ask questions about how a Bible story relates to life.

The final stage of the creative process is *improvisation*. This should be our goal. Sometimes we want our kids to just obey what we’ve taught them. We want them to do what they’re told. But if we only have that

level of expectation for leaders, it just creates drones. A great musician has moved beyond competency. He doesn't just hit the right notes. He can play with style. I want something more for my kids too. I look forward to releasing them from our home to find their own way with the Holy Spirit.



### Jazz and the Creative Process

“The popular misconception is that jazz players are untutored geniuses who play their instruments as if they are picking notes out of thin air. But studies of jazz have shown that the art is very complex—the result of a relentless pursuit of learning and disciplined imagination. It’s that relentless pursuit and disciplined imagination, not simple genius, that allow jazz players to improvise—from the Latin *improvisus*, meaning ‘not seen ahead of time’—and it’s the improvisation that has become the defining hallmark of the art form.” —Frank J. Barrett\*

- *Instruction*: learning the basics. It’s learning piano scales. Jazz players build a vocabulary of phrases and patterns by imitating, repeating, and memorizing the solos and phrases of the masters until they become part of their repertoire of “licks.”†
- *Integration*: growing in experience and then making connections that weren’t there before. It’s like playing a song that you already know but playing it in a new arrangement or playing it for the first time with a friend. “After years of practicing and absorbing patterns, musicians recognize what phrases fit within different forms and the various options available within the constraints of different chords and songs. They study other players’ thought and processes and learn to export materials from different contexts and vantage points, combining, extending, and varying the material, adding and changing notes, varying accents, and subtly shifting the contour of a memorized phrase.”‡
- *Improvisation*: creating and finding my own way by putting newly imagined ideas into practice. It’s like jamming with a jazz band and creating a new riff on the fly. “The goal of improvisation is to be mindful and creative, making up ideas on the spot that respond to what’s happening in the moment.”§

\* Frank J. Barrett, *Yes to the Mess* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 7.

† Ibid.

‡ Ibid, 7-8.

§ Ibid, 7.



## **The Myths of Creativity**

Nowhere is there more confusion about leadership than in the area of creativity. Liu and Noppe-Brandon warn us that there are “paralyzingly prevalent” myths about creativity and imagination.<sup>17</sup>

The first is the myth of the *genius*. It says, “You either have it or you don’t.” This is for those of you who have read this far and are saying, “Yeah, but I’m not Steve Jobs.” The myth of the creative genius implies, first, that some of us don’t have an active imagination and, second, that whatever amount of imagination we may have is a fixed quantity and will never change. But if imagination is simply “the raw ability to conjure up a different reality,”<sup>18</sup> then those notions are demonstrably false. Imagination can be taught, instilled, and developed. Creativity *can* be cultivated. Tom and David Kelley tell us, “Creative confidence is like a muscle—it can be strengthened and nurtured through effort and experience.”<sup>19</sup>

The second is the myth of the *artist*. It says, “Imagination is an unbounded mystery.” This myth says that there is no real way to explain how imagination works. But that’s an overly romantic notion. Liu and Noppe-Brandon observe that “people from all walks of life are habituated to saying that imagination is like intuition: a gut thing, beyond words and rational understanding.”<sup>20</sup> Some go so far as to say that any constraints dampen creativity. It’s not true. Though we may never know everything there is to know about imagination, we do know that the one who created our imaginations is a God of order. We may not be able to plumb the depths of creativity or explain every creative impulse, but anyone who has imagined a meal and then made a grocery list is framing and ordering their creativity. We can’t reduce the creative process to an algorithm, but that doesn’t mean we should throw up our hands.<sup>21</sup>

These myths blind us to our God-given creativity and to the joy of the creative process. According to Bruce Nussbaum, even some of the most talented people fail to recognize that what they do is indeed creative.

They aren’t seeing any bright light bulbs going off. They can’t pinpoint any special moment when creativity “happened.” I’ve heard of an en-



---

## The Myths of Creativity

Subpoints adapted from *The Myths of Creativity*, by David Burkus:

**The Genius:** “You have it or you don’t.”

- “Creativity is merely a personality type.” The myth says, “Creative types are born that way. You are creative or you aren’t.” But if creativity is simply the ability to make connections, it’s a gift that every person can cultivate through disciplined work, preparation, and evaluation.
- “Creativity is for experts.” The myth says that those with the deepest knowledge in a domain are most likely to have breakthrough ideas. In reality, a certain level of expertise leads to narrowed thinking and can even decrease creative output. The toughest problems are often solved by people at the edge of a domain, those with enough knowledge to contribute but enough ignorance to take innovative paths.

**The Artist:** “It’s a mystery. It can’t be bounded or understood.”

- “Creativity requires complete originality.” The myth says we come up with new ideas *ex nihilo*. But we’re not God. If creativity is part of the *imago Dei*, creative leaders in every domain can learn—and “steal”—from a whole history of creative problem solving.
- “Creativity requires unbounded freedom.” The myth says that creativity is dampened by constraints. In reality, order and boundaries fire creative energy. One example is the twelve-tone musical scale, which resulted in the greatest explosion of musical creativity in human history.



---

gineer working on an advanced jet engine—basically handcrafting a gigantic, complex, high-tech machine out of titanium, successfully boosting its efficiency by 20 percent—who failed to recognize that he’s performing a creative activity. I’ve seen a student use a smartphone app technology to develop a whole new way for her Gen Y friends to experience art, and still not consider herself a creative person.<sup>22</sup>

Many who do see themselves as creative experience all kinds of anxiety about it. Studies have shown that people associate creative ideas with negative words like *agony*, *poison*, and even *vomit*.<sup>23</sup> It is

especially true in the church. We're afraid that if we start being too creative theologically, we may all become heretics. The result is leaders who reject creative vision for predictability and conventionality and lose their joy along the way.

The biggest obstacle to creative leadership is a failure by the leader to recognize his or her own creativity. As Tharp tells us, "Creativity is not just for artists. It's for businesspeople looking for a new way to close a sale; it's for engineers trying to solve a problem; it's for parents who want their children to see the world in more than one way."<sup>24</sup> It's for ministers. Preachers need creativity to craft sermons week after week. Pastoral counselors need creativity to help others envision how Christ and his redemptive work connect to their struggles. It takes imagination to envision change for someone who has suffered through a lifetime of abuse. It takes creativity to help a man entrenched in sexual sin to see how his life could change.

Christian leaders need to put down the lies we've believed about creativity and put on the truth: We *are* creative. We create and imagine because we've been created in the image of the One from whom all creativity and imagination derives. A more robust doctrine of God the Creator will help us step into creative work with confidence and help us inspire others to embrace their God-given creativity as well.

### **The Greatest Creator**

Far too often arguments about the age of the earth and modern science hijack our conversation about creation. But when God laid the foundations of the earth, the morning stars sang together and the angels shouted for joy (Job 38:4, 7). Christians believe that God is inherently outgoing and life-giving. God didn't need to create the world, but the Father, Son, and Spirit delighted to share their life, love, and joy.<sup>25</sup> One theologian writes, "Creation is a project—that is to say, it is made to go somewhere."<sup>26</sup> God was imagining the way forward. Just think about it:

*God imagines.* The triune God was there, before the beginning, abiding in love and dreaming the future into existence. We learn later, in Paul's letters, just how he delighted to share his inner life with us—the

peace God gives when we pray far surpasses our limited understanding (Phil. 4:7); God delighted to fill us with his immeasurable love in Christ—to do more than we can ask or even imagine (Eph. 3:14–21); God’s purposes for his people are beyond anything we would be able to draft or whiteboard (Rom. 11:33).<sup>27</sup> Before the foundations of the world, before the time came to fulfill his plans and dreams, God had pleasures and desires for us in Christ (Eph. 1:4–5).

*God patiently hovers.* He was full of desire, but God didn’t rush it. The Bible tells us, “The earth was without form and void. . . . And the Spirit of God was *hovering* over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2). Troy Bronsink calls hovering “the posture of creative patience.”<sup>28</sup> No sooner had creation begun than the Spirit slowed the process down to a crawl. God could have spun out the whole plan of redemption with one word, but he didn’t. His pleasures and desires don’t cook up in a microwave. The creation project took time. It unfolded bit-by-bit, day-by-day.<sup>29</sup> Part of the Holy Spirit’s role in creation is to do the quiet detail work. Like a hovering dove or a nurturing mother, the Spirit hovers. He perfects and completes. He garnishes and beautifies.<sup>30</sup> Job 26:13 says, “By his breath [or Spirit] the skies became fair” (NIV). He gives ongoing life—sustaining the world God has made and making it fresh and fruitful (Pss. 33:6; 104:30; Isa. 32:15).

*God acts.* God didn’t stop with a dream. He applied his imagination. God created every kind of place—the mountains, the rivers, the forests, the oceans. He created every kind of plant—trees, grass, bushes, the vegetables we eat, and the seaweed that grows under the ocean. He created every kind of animal—giraffes, butterflies, aardvarks, and stingrays. And he made you and me (Genesis 1–2). God spoke and his Word went out in the power of the Spirit. The Father creates through the Word (John 1:3). He accomplishes his creation work through the Son (Col. 1:15–16). That’s how his dreams become a reality (Ps. 33:6; Heb. 11:3).

*God holds it together.* The New Testament tells us that God didn’t merely make all things. He made them for a purpose. He made them for the Son. “All things were created through him and for him” (Col. 1:16). The Son gives the cosmos structure and coherence (Heb. 1:3).<sup>31</sup>

He gives shape and direction to the universe. He made all things. For his pleasure, they were created (Rev. 4:11). The heavens declare his greatness (Ps. 19:1), and history in its time will show his beauty (Eccles. 3:11).

*God rests.* God didn't need to stop. He was not exhausted by his creation work. But on the seventh day, God rested (Gen. 2:2-3; Ex. 20:8-11). And he taught that the rhythm of our work and creativity includes "stopping, setting down the brush, the drumsticks, the pen, the shovel, closing the laptop, finishing the sermon, and turning off the iPhone."<sup>32</sup> When God rested from creation, it didn't mean all his work was done. His redeeming and re-creating work continues (2 Cor. 5:17). But by modeling rest, God invites us to stop, receive what has been made as a gift of grace (Heb. 10:9-11), and see unfinished work as an opportunity to imagine and dream again another day.

In every stage, God's creation work is amazing. When we make things, we're like Steve Jobs and Picasso. We have to "steal." We use materials at hand. If you wanted to make a piece of artwork, you would take a blank piece of paper or a canvas. Then you would use acrylic, ink, watercolor, pencil, or maybe crayon to create something on that blank page. You might even cut out clippings from a magazine and use glue to paste them into a collage. But God didn't create that way. He didn't have any materials or supplies. God not only made everything; he alone creates *ex nihilo*. He made everything out of nothing at all. Catherine Vos sums it up nicely in *A Child's Story Bible*: "When a man builds a house, he must first have wood, nails, glass, and many other things. If he does not have something out of which to make it, he cannot build a house. But God made the world out of nothing at all."<sup>33</sup>

When we teach this to the kids in our children's ministry, we tell them to yell out something that they want to make, like a CAT! DOG! PIANO! RHINOCEROS! DUCK-BILLED PLATYPUS! After each ridiculous idea, we pause and look around to see if it has appeared. It never has. Only God can make something out of nothing. Do you realize that when God made a giraffe, there had never been one before? Not only did he make something from nothing with only his words, but



## Trinitarian Doctrine 2: Creation

God made everything. His creation work is a purposeful project of love. God imagines and plans. The Spirit patiently hovers and garnishes the world with life. The Son accomplishes the Father's plan and holds all things together by the word of his power. And it is good. God is at rest with all he has made.

*God imagines and plans.* The triune God was there, before the beginning, abiding in love and dreaming the future into existence. Before the foundations of the world, before the time came to fulfill his plans and dreams, God had pleasures and desires for us in Christ (Eph. 1:4-5).

*We imagine and plan.* Our creativity begins with hopeful prayer, meditation, and brainstorming. Imagination means looking ahead beyond present reality and mapping out what is possible.

*God patiently hovers.* Part of the Holy Spirit's role in creation is to do the quiet detail work. He garnishes and beautifies. He gives ongoing life—sustaining the world God has made and making it fresh and fruitful (Pss. 33:6; 104:30; Isa. 32:15).

*We patiently hover.* Creative leaders call this an incubation period. We leave a margin between the time of sensing a problem and initiating a solution. Patience leaves room for awe and understanding. It gives time for nuance and detail.

*God acts.* God spoke and his Word went out in the power of the Spirit. The Father creates through the Word (John 1:3). He accomplishes his creation work through the Son (Col. 1:15-16). That's how his dreams become a reality (Ps. 33:6; Heb. 11:3).

*We act.* Creative leaders take risks. For us to become creative leaders, imagination must be cultivated. We must lay down our safety nets and step out. Because we sense God's presence, we can step out by faith to join him in his work.

*God holds it together.* God made all things with purpose. "All things were created through him and for him" (Col. 1:16). The Son gives the cosmos structure and coherence (Heb. 1:3). He gives shape and direction to the universe.

*We reintegrate.* We live in a time of great fragmentation. God invites us to entrust the materials we make, the time we invest, and the limited power and glory we hold to the larger whole of his purpose. He invites us to join ourselves to his creative project.

*God rests.* In modeling rest, God invited us to stop, receive what has been made as a gift of grace (Heb. 10:9–11), and see unfinished work as an opportunity to imagine and dream again.

*We rest.* The rhythm of our work and creativity includes stopping, finishing the sermon, and turning off the iPhone. God uses times of rest to teach us distance from and clarity of vision for our work.



also the things he makes are *completely* unique. There had never been a bear before God made the first bear. There had never been a human before God made the first human. God didn't need to have a wealth of experiences to make new connections. As Harold Best observes, "God is the first abstract artist."<sup>34</sup> God is the greatest creator. God imagines and plans. The Spirit patiently hovers and garnishes the world with life. The Son accomplishes the Father's plan and holds all things together by the word of his power. And it is good. God is at rest with all he has made. Within himself, he contains the fullness to fill all in all (Eph. 1:22–23). He has the best imagination. He even imagined the future. Just think—iPhones have been on his mind since before Methuselah. He dreamed it up. He made it happen.

### **In the Image of God**

In early August 2010, Brandon Stanton arrived in New York City. He was a broke, out-of-work bond trader who had left Chicago earlier that summer to become a photographer. He'd set out on a photo tour of several American cities. He started in Pittsburgh and then moved on to Philadelphia. "My parents thought I was crazy," Stanton reports. "There were several awkward phone calls during this time. My mother didn't try to hide her disappointment. She saw bond trading as a very prestigious profession. Photography . . . seemed like a thinly veiled attempt to avoid employment."<sup>35</sup>

Stanton initially planned to stay in New York for a week and then catch a flight to the West Coast, but a beautiful vision kept him in the Big Apple. When his bus emerged from the Lincoln Tunnel and he entered the city for the first time, he was overcome by all the people. “That night, I created a photo album for my New York photos. I called it ‘Humans of New York.’” The photo album grew into a blog and then a social media sensation. In just over one year, the *Humans of New York* Facebook page had over half a million fans. When St. Martin’s Press turned the project into a photo book, it became an instant *New York Times* best seller.

Why are we so fascinated with profiles and faces? I think one Amazon reviewer captured the reason when she wrote, “This book is a gorgeous glimpse into the heart of humanity.” Looking at portraits, or even just people watching, gives us a sense of what we have in common with all humanity. We see our family resemblance in every picture—two eyes, a nose, the varying yet familiar expressions of a human face. We are one. Yet we’re so different.

Genesis 1:26 further explains our fascination with faces. God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” The verse uses two terms to describe God’s own divine portraiture. These terms—*likeness* and *image*—give definition to two primary human relationships. First, the term *likeness* reveals the vertical relationship between God and all humanity.<sup>36</sup> We do hold something in common with all of mankind. We are all crafted in God’s image. God made us to be a part of a vast family that reflects his glory. We have been imprinted with a divine role and a family resemblance.<sup>37</sup> Second, the term *image* reveals a horizontal relationship between humanity and the created order. We are God’s representatives on earth. Like the faces on Mount Rushmore physically testify to the reign of American democracy across the Great Plains, our varied faces testify to the reign of God in the world. We were created to teach the world to love him, enjoy him, and submit to his rule.<sup>38</sup> Sometimes poorly but many times beautifully, we live out the creation mandate by creating culture across the world.<sup>39</sup>

Resembling God—being his image to the world and in the world—

includes at least five dimensions that help to shatter the lies we're tempted to believe about creativity.

*First, we are relational beings.* Because God is a Trinity and he has lived in community eternally, he has created us to live in community as well. There is no such thing as a lone artist, a lone businessman, or a lone ministry leader. Michael Horton describes it this way: "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live in unceasing devotion to each other, reaching outward beyond the Godhead to create a community of creatures serving as a giant analogy of the Godhead's relationship."<sup>40</sup>

Even the so-called lone artist isn't completely alone—if he has a belly button. His conception of art is rooted in a tradition of human expression, whether he knows or acknowledges it or not. He is connected to some kind of family and history. Since we're made as relational beings, it pays to believe that creativity can be experienced best with others.

*Second, we are emotional beings.* We live emotional lives, because God experiences emotion. He is the God who sees the great wickedness of the human race and experiences regret and a troubled heart (Gen. 6:5–6). Our Savior is the one who wept at a friend's funeral (John 11:35). He is the mighty warrior who delights in his people and rejoices over them with singing (Zeph. 3:17). When we experience a full range of emotions, we are imaging our Creator. When our creativity reflects disgust, anger, delight, pain, peace, and joy, we look like our God. Creativity involves making connections—what I called integration, above—and often the first connection we make is an emotional one. This isn't an ability that some people have and some people don't. The truth is that we *can* make these connections because, like God, we all feel.<sup>41</sup>

*Third, we have longings and desire.* Think about how you long for more. You want a healthier body, so you change your diet or adapt your exercise routine. You long for things to be done more efficiently, so you rework your schedule and rewrite job descriptions at the office. You long for a better relationship with your spouse, so you plan date nights and daydream about how to pursue her. In Adam's song about

Eve, we see strong desire (for companionship and sexual fulfillment, Gen. 2:23–25) present in the garden long before Satan subverted it. But because our desires are fallen, many leaders are afraid to talk about them. A leader may be unhappy with a staff member’s performance, but if his emotions are high, he may have a difficult time expressing exactly what he expects or how the staff member can improve. If desire is an implication of being made in God’s image, we need to grow in our skill of recognizing, expressing, and asking for what we want. Desire matters. God made us with desire so that all people would desire him and worship him (1 Chron. 16:23–25; Ps. 37:3). What we all ultimately long for is God, though in our sin, that desire is distorted and deflected. As a Christian leader, you want God. God knows this, and it’s why he tells us to express our desires and ask for anything (Matt. 18:19; John 14:14; 16:24). We should ask like little children who aren’t afraid (Matt. 7:7–12). And if we can be that open about our desires with God, we shouldn’t be afraid to be open about our desires with one another.

At the beginning of this chapter, I explained that creativity is often born out of the gap that exists between where things are and where things should be. Embrace the emotions you have about what’s broken around you. Embrace the desires you have to bring order to the pain and chaos. Step into the relationships God has given you. You don’t have to be a genius to bring your feelings, wants, and community to bear on the obstacles you face. These first three implications of being God’s image—the truth that God has made us to relate, feel, and desire—destroy the myth that only a genius can be creative. These three realities, which are common to mankind, lead to the creative impulse. We’re created for relationships so we naturally make connections. We’re all emotional creatures, so very often the first connection we make—whether joy, fear, anger, or disgust—is an emotional one. And we all have desires. We see something right with the world, and we want more of it. We see something wrong with the world, and we want to find a way to make it right. It doesn’t take a genius to relate, feel, or want. You just have to be human. We should be able to sit with other leaders and say, “Hey team, what are you feeling? What are we going for? What do we really

desire?” You’ll find the freedom to do this when you see these abilities are rooted in God’s design. You’re made in God’s likeness, and he created you—yes, even you—to image forth creativity.

*Fourth, we can think and reason. We can plan and will.* God made everything, and because God made everything, he owns everything. Because God owns everything, he is also the King of everything. He rules everything—all creation. On the fourth day, God created the sun, the moon, and the stars (Gen. 1:14–19). They show God’s rule over his creation by marking off the seasons, the days, and the years. These markers order our world. They pattern our time. God rules over the world he made by guiding and directing it to do everything that he planned. He didn’t create the world wondering what might happen. God works out everything according to what he wants (Eph. 1:11). And no one can stop God from doing what he wants, because nothing is outside his control. He controls both grasshoppers and hurricanes.<sup>42</sup>

Because we see God’s greatness in bringing order and pattern to the world, we shouldn’t be surprised when we desire to bring order and pattern out of chaos as well. This isn’t a capacity that only type-A organizers have. In fact, seeing connections between reasoned thinking and imagination should destroy the myth that creativity is just some mysterious “thing.” In reality, creativity can’t exist at all without some level of order. Andy Crouch tells us:

Creativity cannot exist without order—a structure within which creation can happen. On a cosmic level the extraordinary profusion of species could never survive if the world were an undifferentiated soup of elements. This is true of human creativity too. Without the darkened box of a theater, films would lose their compelling power. Without the lines and spaces that make up written English, this book would be a soup of letters. Creativity requires cosmos—it requires an ordered environment.<sup>43</sup>

Genesis presents God himself as both Creator and ruler of the universe. Crouch continues, “Creators are those who make something new; rulers are those who maintain order and separation.”<sup>44</sup> In reality, creativity cannot exist without order—a structure within which creat-

ing can happen. New connections that are made must be organized and implemented in order for newly imagined ideas to become a reality. So God hasn't only given us the ability to relate, feel, and desire; he has also given us the ability to think and plan. Our sinful tendency is either to hold so tightly to structure that we stifle growth or not to hold it at all, so chaos reigns. But one of God's greatest gifts to the world is the gift of ordered creativity and fruitful space—not a structure that boxes us in (or that boxes God in—God forbid!) but a plan and structure that nurtures life and freedom.<sup>45</sup>

*Finally, we value.* We evaluate worth. We attach moral value and aesthetic value to all kinds of things. Harold Best says: "I don't know anyone who doesn't love or value art, or who isn't somehow drawn to the aesthetic quality of something: a finely wrought tool, a beautifully sutured incision, a quilt, or a Chevrolet. The love of quality—whether or not beauty is consciously thought of—is universal."<sup>46</sup>

When we evaluate, we pass judgment. We say, "This is good," "This is better," or "This is bad." We do this not because we're judgmental. It's because we're made in the image of the Judge. We're made in the image of the one who made all things and then took a step back and said, "It's good. It's good. It's very good." Wise leadership is impossible without discernment, that is, without the ability to evaluate what is right or wrong and what is good or better. It shouldn't surprise us that some of the most skillful creatives in the Bible—Bezalel, who crafted the tabernacle (Ex. 31:3; 35:31), and Solomon, the king and scientist and sage (1 Kings 4:29; 2 Chron. 9:23)—were said to be filled with a Spirit of wisdom and discernment. This ability comes from God, who is himself the only wise God (Rom. 16:27) and grants wisdom to the foolish.

When creativity is grounded in our ability to think and evaluate, we are set free from seeing it as a mystery that can't be taught. Creativity is the skillful application of God-given imagination. It *can* be learned, honed, and grown.

We can be creative leaders because we've been made in God's likeness. We image forth the Creator. And because we're made in his



### **Implications of Being Made in God's Image**

- We are *relational*. God made us for community, because he exists eternally in community.
- We have *emotions*. God made us to feel, because he experiences emotions and feels deeply.
- We have *desires*. God made us with longings, because he has desires for the world.
- We *think*. God made us to think and organize, because he is a God of order and not disorder.
- We *value*. God made us to assign value, because he is the Judge of all things.



image, we have imagination. We can see the way forward through the chaos and disorder. We can envision a more beautiful life for the people under our care. With God on our side, we see a brighter future for the communities where we lead, and we can inspire others to join us as we pursue that God-given vision.

### **Imagine the Way Forward**

In the previous chapter, I argued that strong leaders take the time to listen to God's voice and clearly define their convictions. Often convictional leadership and creative leadership are pitted against one another. Convictional leaders can stagnate. Information overload leaves them paralyzed so they never implement creative ideas. Creative leaders are on the other end of the spectrum. They can tend toward novelty—the constant pursuit of fads.

We need leaders who combine both conviction and imagination. Convictional leaders have a strong belief that something *must* be. Before any of those *musts* get accomplished, we need to dream. When we combine our conviction of what *must* be with a dream of what *could* be, we get vision. Andy Stanley says, "Vision is a clear mental picture of what could be, fueled with the conviction that it should be."<sup>47</sup> Kouzes and Posner tell us:

Every organization, every social movement, begins with a dream. . . . Leaders *envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities*. . . . Much as an architect draws a blueprint or an engineer builds a model, you need to have a clear vision of what the results should look like before starting any project.

They go on to quote Rupessh Roy: “You need to have clear goals and a vision to make a positive difference; and you have to be able to share that vision with others and get them to believe in it.”<sup>48</sup>

When we encounter trials and tribulations in ministry, it would be easy to despair. But a creative leader can dream about how those challenges of suffering are really opportunities for glory. Kouzes and Posner put it this way: “If you are going to be an exemplary leader, you have to be able to imagine a positive future.”<sup>49</sup> In fact, they say, “it’s this quality of focusing on the future that most differentiates people who are seen as leaders from those who are not.”<sup>50</sup> Leaders know where people need to go. They envision the way forward. They are able to imagine in advance what it will look like to work out their convictions in a particular place. With a clear vision in mind, they inspire others to join and follow their lead.



## Leadership Skill Set 2: Dreaming and Persuading

Imagining the way forward requires . . .

- *Dreaming*. Make creative connections between where you are and what God wants.
- *Persuading*. Be winsome. Be a poet. Help your people dream.



Nick Bogardus leads Cross of Christ Church in Irvine, California. One could argue that no place in America has produced more church movements in the past fifty years than Nick’s context—Orange County. Calvary Chapel, Vineyard, Saddleback, TBN, Campus Crusade, and the

Crystal Cathedral were all birthed there. Not only is Orange County a very churched culture, but it also has exported a lot of theology and practice to American evangelicalism at large. It might be tempting as a new church plant to simply copy the most “relevant” strategies from the church down the street. How does Nick cultivate a creative vision for his unique context? Here is what he told us:

I’m not a great preacher. In many ways, I’m still trying to find my voice. I love digging into the biblical text, but sometimes I have a hard time. . . . I watched an interview with Rick Rubin on the BBC about six months ago. Rubin is arguably the best music producer of the last 50 years, having produced groundbreaking records with the likes of the Beastie Boys, Red Hot Chili Peppers and Johnny Cash. It inspired me to try identifying patterns in his work. I found a playlist of his greatest hits and started listening. I noticed many of the songs, especially the hip-hop hits, began with a declarative that grabbed your attention—think “No sleep ’til Brooklyn!” or “I’m going back to Cali.” As I distill the theology of a sermon, I try to turn it into a similar phrase that I could start a sermon with and even use like a chorus in a song. . . . While I’m still learning, simply being curious has helped me create in a way that shows people the gospel isn’t just true but good.

The church needs leaders like Nick who make space to dream and then work creatively like poets. If we are going to see our convictions carry weight in a world that is increasingly skeptical of our faith, we need to develop winsomeness and poetic skill. Tharp says, “If art is the bridge between what you see in your mind and what the world sees, then skill is how you build that bridge.”<sup>51</sup> Ministry leaders are in the business of bridge building. Often when pastors want to teach about theology, their preaching turns into a lecture. And it’s boring. Honestly, that’s a really sad thing, because the Bible isn’t boring. It stirs the heart. We say, “Pray.” But Lamentations says, “Pour out your heart like water” (2:19). We say, “God is sovereign.” But Jesus says, “God knows and cares for the sparrow” (cf. Matt. 6:26; 10:29). We say, “Jesus saves.” But the Psalm says, “Light dawns for the righteous” (Ps. 97:11 RSV). *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* reminds us:

Because of the predominantly theological and devotional purposes to which Christians put the Bible, it is almost impossible not to slip into the error of looking upon the Bible as a theological outline with proof texts attached. Yet the Bible is much more a book of images and motifs than of abstractions and propositions. . . . The Bible is a book that *images* the truth.<sup>52</sup>

People think not merely in syllogisms but also in stories. We need to engage the people we lead logically, but we need to persuade and inspire as well.<sup>53</sup> We have young preachers in our community who bring strong biblical conviction to the pulpit, and I encourage it, but I exhort them to be poets as well. Preach but paint the picture.

Movie producer Brian Godawa describes how, after first coming to the faith, he tended to reduce other Christians to their doctrinal commitments, “judging their status before God based on my creedal scorecard. ‘Well, you did okay, eight out of ten doctrines correct, but those two wrong ones set you back on the “hierarchy of doctrinal knowledge.” I guess I will tolerate you.”<sup>54</sup> He continues:

I noticed in myself a tendency toward reducing everything to logical debate. I became argumentative. Encounters with unbelievers and even believers would seem to always end in cognitive dispute. . . . I would engage in rigorous debate with the unenlightened and proceed to destroy unbelieving worldviews like they were going out of style. It was like genocide of unbelief. “So, you’re a naturalist? Well, if you believe everything has a natural cause, then your own thoughts are caused by nature, which means your truth claim of naturalism is self-refuting.” WHAM! “So, you’re a relativist? Well, if you believe there are no absolutes, then that is an absolute, and your relativism is self-refuting.” WHAM! . . . I felt like the Muhammad Ali of apologetics. . . . But I eventually learned that winning an argument is not always the same as persuasion; you can win the battle of debate but lose the war for a soul.<sup>55</sup>

When our hearts are increasingly warmed by the gospel, our witness sounds less and less like the work of a lawyer and more like the songs of a poet. Maybe you’re thinking, “I’m not a poet. I’m also not a movie producer.” You’re right.

But let me tell you something else that is true. You are creative.  
This is important.

No leadership will thrive without creativity. Engineers need creativity. Businessmen need creativity. Children's ministry needs creativity. Counseling needs creativity. Preaching needs creativity.

"The weakness of the Pharisee in the days of old," warned A. W. Tozer, "was his lack of imagination. . . . He saw the text with its carefully guarded theological definition and he saw nothing beyond."<sup>56</sup> Religion is built on fear and control. When we're afraid, we build closed systems and standards to control others. Without creativity, Christian leaders become copycats who follow like drones after the latest ministry trend. Without creativity, preachers speak only in propositions and principles.

Where are fear and control going to get you in your parenting? Nowhere. I need to be filled with the life-giving, creative Spirit to parent my kids well. I need to know what God's Word says about parenting. Then I need to know my kids. Then, through the stories I tell them and the adventures we have together, I need to inspire them to make those creative connections between what should be and what is in their lives. I pray that my parenting looks more like Jesus speaking parables and less like a recitation of tax law.

John Hodgman is a self-professed agnostic and prolific humorist who writes for *The Daily Show*. In a recent podcast interview, he described creativity this way:

It's not that you have to create a new idea. You have to learn to be receptive to new ideas when they come. This is the whole concept of the *genius loci*—the genius of a place. [It's the idea that] creativity was a spirit that came to you. And that's what it feels like when it's really working. You really feel like you're getting dictation from somewhere else. It's the closest to thing to a religious experience that I've ever had, because it truly feels like it's coming from some other place.<sup>57</sup>

Christian leader, here is an invitation for you. Because you are in communion with God, you have more than a divine muse. You have

God himself. He made you in his image. Be receptive to his voice, and then offer your life to God. As you offer your gifts, Christ perfects them.

Ironically, I hit a massive creative wall while doing edits of this chapter. I worked through the Trinitarian implications of creativity, but I didn't know how to communicate it. I sat down with another pastor and shared my struggle. He challenged me to rest in my giftedness. He told me to stop trying to be smart. He told me to stop trying to be so creative but rest in the creative gifts God has given me. I came back



### Cumulative Chapter Summary

Leadership begins with *knowing where people need to go*. When you combine *conviction* and *creativity*, you have vision to see the way forward.

<i>Leadership Vision</i>	<i>Trinitarian Doctrine</i>	<i>Leadership Skills</i>
<b>Convictional leaders</b> embody what they believe.	<b>Revelation:</b> God speaks. He makes himself known through his world, Word, and works.	Embodying what you believe requires . . . <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Listening</i>. Seek to hear God's voice in order to clarify your convictions.</li> <li>• <i>Living it out</i>. Practice what you preach, because people do what people see.</li> </ul>
<b>Creative leaders</b> imagine the way forward.	<b>Creation:</b> God made everything. His creation work is a purposeful project of love.	Imagining the way forward requires . . . <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Dreaming</i>. Make creative connections between where you are and what God wants.</li> <li>• <i>Persuading</i>. Be winsome. Be a poet. Help your people dream.</li> </ul>



to revising the chapter and felt empowered to offer what I have. Brené Brown tells us, “Vulnerability is the core of shame and fear and our struggle for worthiness, but it’s also the birthplace of joy, creativity, belonging, and love.”<sup>58</sup>

Lay down your anxiety and your fear, and play a little more. Step into a fully human creative life—one that makes real connections between the truth God has spoken to you to and the real world you inhabit every day. I know you can see the gap between where your church is right now and what God wants for your community. Start making creative connections and lead your people. Help them dream about how you will get from here to there. Dream for yourself and then start talking about those dreams with your people. Step into poetic inspiration with confidence, because, after all, you are made in the Creator’s image. You *are* creative. You won’t be stepping out alone. The same Spirit who hovered over the waters hovers over your heart and your church (Gen. 1:2). He created you in his image, and he goes with you (Josh. 1:9; Matt. 28:20). Start imagining. Start dreaming. Start inspiring. Start living faithfully the script God has given you. Start creating.

### **Exercises**

Read through this selection of ideas and activities to help you practice creative leadership. Pick out one or two and incorporate them into your regular leadership rhythms.<sup>59</sup>

1. As you read magazines and newspapers or search the web, save articles or photos that touch your heart. Paste them in your journal to help fire your imagination and guide your prayer life.
2. A few times this week set aside thirty minutes before bedtime to journal about your daydreams. Write bits and pieces of what you dreamed about for your family, ministry, church, and neighborhood.
3. Journal about your desires. What do you see in your life right now that is not working well, and what do you want to do about it? What are you passionate about, and what ideas get you excited? Where in your life do you see God at work currently? What is God calling you to step into?

4. Sketch out God's long view. Clear a desk or table. Grab some crayons or colored pencils and paper. Read Jeremiah 29:4–14. Draw out what is happening in this passage. Draw your own neighborhood or city as a modern context for Jeremiah's promise. Don't worry about being an artist. Just have fun sketching it out.
5. Set aside a day simply to dream and think about a vision with your team. Talk to your team members and find out their hopes, dreams, and aspirations for the future of your organization or ministry. Identify the biggest blocking issues that are keeping the vision from being achieved. Brainstorm and imagine creative ways to move the organization forward.
6. Gather the team again. Share metaphors, symbols, examples, stories, pictures, and words that represent the vision of what you're trying to become. Focus on biblical images and images from the life story of your church. Save these and pick them up at a later date to remind your team about the vision or to share the vision with others.

### **Prayer**

*I acknowledge, O Lord, with thanksgiving, that thou hast created this thy image in me, so that, remembering thee, I may think of thee, may love thee. But this image is so effaced and worn away by my faults, it is so obscured by the smoke of my sins, that it cannot do what it was made to do, unless thou renew and reform it. I am not trying, O Lord, to penetrate thy loftiness, for I cannot begin to match my understanding with it, but I desire in some measure to understand thy truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order to believe but I believe in order to understand. For this too I believe, that "unless I believe, I shall not understand."<sup>60</sup>*