

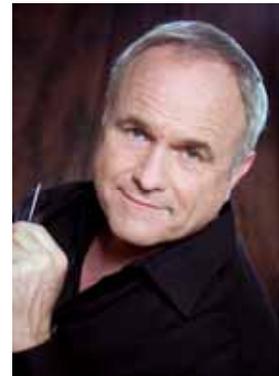
Innovation and Creativity

an interview with

Michael Mendizza

TTF board member, Andrew Papageorge, a world leader in large system innovation, recently interviewed Michael Mendizza. Together they explored what it means to be creative and innovative, both critical topics in our brave new world of accelerating challenges and change.

Michael is an author, educator, documentary filmmaker, founder of Touch the Future, a nonprofit learning design center and CEO of Nurturing, Inc., a provider of support resources for parents and early childcare providers. Michael's passion centers on the state of optimum learning and performance, what athletes call the *Zone*, researchers call *Flow* and children call *Play*. His book, *Magical Parent-Magical Child, the Art of Joyful Parenting*, co-authored with Joseph Chilton Pearce, applies research on optimum states to parenting and to education.



1. YOU HAVE WORKED WITH SOME VERY CREATIVE AND INNOVATIVE PEOPLE OVER THE YEARS. WHO ARE SOME OF THOSE PEOPLE?

Business leaders, doctors, lawyers, Indian chiefs, scientists, educators, brain researchers, artists, authors, athletes – as a documentary filmmaker I've interviewed several hundred people, some of the most revolutionary people of the 20th century from Timothy Leary and William Burroughs to Ashley Montagu, Joseph Chilton Pearce, David Bohm and J. Krishnamurit.

2. WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED ABOUT CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION FROM THESE PEOPLE?

For each of these people, creativity, was not a product but rather a *state of being* in relationship with the universe.

Creativity, or the 'free play of the mind,' for David Bohm, one of the most respected and innovative scientist of the 20th century, with whom I was privileged to have a friendship that lasted over a decade, was the essence of both art and science. Art and science don't exist without a free mind. Ashley Montagu, author of over fifty books on being human, described the state of inquiry as: childlike curiosity, imagination, willingness to risk and try new things and if they did not deliver the intended result to try something different. This is the art of 'growing young,' something built into each human being by design.

Krishnamurit embodied this state of freedom, inquiry and connection. He had an insight into the habitual nature of the mind, how it becomes conditioned, attached to fixed images and beliefs, and how this cages, like a bird, true intelligence. He traveled the world and spoke of a life guided by innate intelligence rather than cultural conditioning.

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Imagine waking up and discovering suddenly that most of the images that dance around in your brain are just that, images. Imagine having an insight, an illuminating state of perception, that pulled back the curtain and you saw with child-like innocence that the King was wearing no cloths, that all the pomp and social status meant nothing and you connected with a reality that ran infinitely deeper than our cultural conditioning. All the social categories, the labels, the PhD's, the celebrity status, even most religious status was a masquerade, a set of mental images, and nothing more than a symbol.

Seeing that the rope is not a snake, one is left with a completely new set of values, not those imposed by culture, but something deeper and more universal than even being human. Joseph Chilton Pearce, a dear friend and mentor for the past fifteen years, called this insight a Crack in the Cosmic Egg, which was the title of his first major book. The cosmic egg is our self-world view, our cultural image or the psychic cage that keeps us from discovering and expressing what we truly are. The crack is when our experience reveals the often absurd limitations of this enculturated self-world view. In that moment there is the possibility of real transformation or what you might call deep personal innovation.

The key is living in the crack, surfing it like a child adapting the past to meet the present in new and creative ways. That, I think is the goal, what nature intended, by design.

3. WHAT MUST LEADERS IN ORGANIZATIONS DO TO PROMOTE MORE CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION?

I prefer a more general view. We are all leaders of organizations called our life. If the goal is to promote more creativity and innovation then each of us must embody and model creativity and innovation as a state of being every day of our lives. Model it. Be the change you want to see in others.

This means you need to bring more energy and attention to the present moment, at least enough to peak out of the hole created by mechanical reflexes. Krishnamurti put it this way. 'Transformation is only possible now, this moment.' If you are drowning in reflexes there is no possibility for creativity and innovation. These potentials only exist when we increase the energy and attention we bring to the present moment – at least enough to rise above our habits.

The mindful attention that occurs naturally in the state of authentic play is the key to personal, organizational and global transformation. The problem is for most this state was replaced by mechanical habits so long ago that few adults can remember what it feels like. The habits kick in too fast.

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I suggest that the people we call geniuses, Einstein for example, retained and drew upon the play state, as nature intended, as they matured. For most however, this innate genius is conditioned out of them by adult models and a mechanical culture that had lost this transformative light long ago.

This is an old story. Instead of genius let's use 'the kingdom of heaven'. Unless we become again as little children, guess what? We can't enter the kingdom. The kingdom of heaven is here, now. It is a state, not a place. Becoming as little children does not mean making mud pies. It refers to restoring the body and brain to its natural order, which is to play with and learn from life, day in and day out. One state is all we can have at a time. The adulterated mind, stuck in its beliefs, dogmas, fixed and defensive pre-judgments can never enter kingdom.

4. WHY IS "PLAY" SO IMPORTANT FOR CRATIVITY AND INNOVATION?

David Bohm described the true nature of thought and even perception as play. The brain is creating an inner 'resonate representation' of our relationship with the world, moment by moment. Some of these representations, which we experiences as different forms of images, are recorded as memory. One of the main characteristics of what we call thought is an instant replay of these recorded impressions. Through trial and error the early child tests the truth of falseness of his or her inner images by playfully interacting with the environment. David used the example of a young man using a mirror to shave for the first time. It takes playful practice to synchronize the reversed image of a sharp razor reflected in the mirror with the actual experience of the blade pressing against one's face. The act of play is to test the validity of the inner image with experience. We call this learning. Real play is the act of real learning.

The brain, being billions of years old, is designed to play, that is to learn. Real learning which always takes place in the state of play demands complete attention. Once learning takes place, however, and we synchronize the image of the razor in the mirror with the actual experience of that blade skimming over our face, the play stops and habit takes over. This is a dramatic and fundamental change. Assumptions kick in. We use the past experience as a mechanical reference for today's shave. Habituation is necessary, part of the brains efficiency. Habituation frees energy and attention to play with (and therefore learn) from the next novel experience. Like rungs on a ladder the act of play with its implicit learning creates a new and more expansive foundation for the next round of play. By design this 'cycle of competence' never ends, or should not. We are designed to play with life our entire life, a process Ashley Montagu called Growing Young. But we don't. The weight of conditioning is too strong. The instant replay of the past, with its unquestioned assumptions, creates a reality of its own.

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Experience and knowledge builds up in the system and we get lazy. New encounters trigger past memory-reflexes that fire automatically. Rather than playing with life in all its exquisite variations we spend most of our life on auto-pilot. I think we all recognize the difference between auto-pilot, the monkey mind, the roof brain chatter that repeats mechanically day in and day out and the state of complete attention that comes with real play and real learning.

Auto-pilot is a state of being, a way of relating to the world, and it is fine for many things, driving a car for example and many other physical and mental activities. Bohm cautioned us however, that there is no real intelligence in a habit or reflex. One engages the full spectrum of intelligences in the state of play. Memory and reflexes are prejudgments. They assume that the present challenge is the same as the past. Often it is. But, in a fast changing world we need to continually engage every ounce of intelligence we have by constantly questioning past assumptions, and creating fresh new responses that are appropriate to the new challenges we face. This demands a quality of mindfulness that extends far beyond auto-pilot. This mindfulness requires energy and attention, without which automatic reflexes simply drive the ship.

Creativity and innovation don't exist in the reflex system. The critical issue is generating the added energy and attention needed to lift perception out of the reflex system. Without it, I think it is clear that most of our lives are driven by mechanical habits.

Play is the state where this extra energy and attention are found - naturally. This brings up a critical issue. Most people think of play as an activity, such as playing ball or the piano. One look at the syntax of the simple sentence, 'play ball,' tells a different story. Play is the state in which we relate to the ball. I can play ball or hate ball. I can play the piano or be bored to tears pounding on the keys. Play is a state of complete attention, of wonder, curiosity, inquire, testing, trying new things. If I do this then what will happen?

Our challenge in an age when information and technology are expanding exponentially is to regain and expand our playful nature in response to an obese (and growing fatter, denser) set of reflexes that are linked to past knowledge. The weight, the gravity produced by the glut of mechanical facts and information consumes most of the energy and attention we generate. Most of us spend most of our lives managing the past rather than living, which means playing with and learning from, the present. Cultivating the state of original play brings the system back to order.

5. THE NAME OF YOUR ORGANIZATION IS "TOUCH THE FUTURE"? WHAT DOES TOUCH THE FUTURE MEAN?

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The future is NOW. The present moment defines the next, what we call the future. You and I as adults, 'Touch the Future' by modeling how children should or should not react to the present moment. We all 'Touch the Future' by how WE, not children, respond to the present. This simple observation, embodies two basic insights.

Human development is 'model dependent.' It is the model-environment that triggers brain growth and development. We keep pointing at the kids, punishing and rewarding, like B.F. Skinner and his rats. But Kids are NOT the Problem. From the moment of conception forward each new human being adapts to the environment and for children WE are THAT environment. If a plant is wilting, for example, focusing on the plant, spraying a leaf or two, is very superficial. Wholeness, the root of the word health, thriving vitality demands that we nurture the whole, the plant-environment, or in our case the adult-child, which are mutually interdependent.

This redirects our attention from the child to the nature and quality of the adult-model-environment, which in terms of human development is key. We think kids are the future, and they are, but evolution invests in adult development and upon that the next generation stands or stoops on our shoulders. The simple fact is that Child development is dependent on Adult development. This demands that we give as much attention, passion and resources to continuing adult development as we do to child development. This is so basic, so obvious, but we keep focusing on the kid, which is like filling the tires when the car is out of gas.

Our goal, mission and passion is to create optimum learning environments where today's parents can continue their unfoldment as human beings by developing and modeling their very best qualities to and with children. By uplifting the adult-model-environment we nurture, enrich and expand every child that adult touches. If we think kids are the problem we neglect the most important catalyst for human evolution, which is continued adult development. Dispelling this myth is our greatest challenge. Why change our behavior kids are the problem?

6. HOW CAN PARENTS NURTURE THEIR CHILDREN TO BE MORE CREATIVE AND INNOVATIVE?

The key to living a life of true creativity and innovation is to live moment by moment without a self image. The urgent and primary responsibility of every adult is to see through the false hopes and false fears imposed by their self image. Easier said than done I agree, but essential just the same.

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The image we have accepted about ourselves is a cultural construct, imprinted at a very early age with one, and only one purpose, to limit and constrain our development by conforming to very narrow, accepted cultural patterns. Having researched, written and produced a documentary on optimum states of learning and performance, what athletes call the *zone*, researchers call *flow* and children call *play*, it is clear that the primary attribute of optimum states is the complete absence of any self-image. Now, this is quite curious, because one of the fundamental assumptions is that the self-image is somehow real, true and permanent. And yet, in every case, what people describe having been in an optimum state is that they were suddenly freed from the limitations and constraints imposed by their self image.

Krishnamurti put it this way; "With complete attention there is no observer." When attention is fragmented there is an observer and that which is being observed. Children are born into a state of complete attention. They call it play. Then adults come along and threaten them out of this entrained state, fragmenting their attention with punishments and rewards. This fragmented state becomes a habit, which is experienced as being both real and permanent. Whenever we look for the self it suddenly appears which becomes a self fulfilling prophecy.

As we said before, human development is model dependent. An adult perpetually trapped in his or her false self image will infect their child with the same delusion. Whenever this false self image is active, true intelligence, creativity and innovation is not. Therefore, finally addressing your question, the most important thing a parent or anyone concerned with the well being of people can do is see through the false hope and false fears attributed to their own self image. The instant this takes place - everything changes. Suddenly the adult is modeling a state of being in relationship that is not fragmented, that is clear, coherent, truly responsible and adaptive to the present moment.

Finally the child, associate, employee, friend is seen for what and who they really are, rather than conforming to the approved or disapproved image. Seeing 'truth' reflected in the mirror or relationship, the other person responds with corresponding truth and creative intelligence. Rather than the cultural image being pole star, creative, adaptive intelligence becomes the guide, mutually reinforced in the constantly changing adult-child relationship.

7. TELL US A BIT ABOUT THE "NURTURING PROJECT".

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Realizing that Kids are NOT the Problem, that the evolution of the species is model dependent, that personal and global transformation demands new adult models, then the real challenge is to awaken this playful-mindful state in today's parents, for they are creating, by the way they live their lives the future – now. If there is any hope it is to raise a generation of human beings that live in the kingdom (this playful-mindful state) fully as children, carrying it forward and expanding it as adults.

This demands that young people, parents, childcare providers, early childhood educators, and teachers invest as much time, energy and attention in continued adult development as they now give to continuing education for children. The next frontier in education is developing this new adult model, not the child.

For most of human history parents parented the way they were parented. That is not good enough. Not today. The world is changing too fast. Everything is different. Children are adapting to a brave new world and adults are struggling to keep up. Today the generation gap is a canyon and growing wider every day. This is new, unprecedented and demands that we reinvent what it means to be a parent. The question is how?

Like a seed planted in soil, children are planted in adults and the adult culture. If a sprout is wilting we water the soil. Good advice for children too. If a child is not thriving enrich the environment, nurture parents and support the people who care for children and watch that child thrive.

We forget becoming a parent is the first step in a lifelong journey of growth and transformation. Each age and stage of a child's development demands new skills, sensitivity, perceptions and responses from parents and from educators. What works at two is inappropriate at four. Change, adapting, developing new skills is not an option.

When viewed from this perspective it becomes clear that parents and those who care for children need playgrounds, safe challenging environments to discover, practice and master new skills all along the way. These environments must be close, convenient, places where adults can observe real children being children in all their wonderful variations. These parent development centers must be filled with the latest research on birth, bonding, brain development, age and stage appropriate learning models and plenty of peer mentors.

Adult development centers, I prefer to call them playgrounds, must offer proven tools for stress management, nonviolent communication, conflict resolution, and the best group communication skills available. Mystery of these 'inner-game skills' require practice, making mistakes, learning and change. If you want to be a good golfer you need to practice. The same is true of parenting.

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To be effective practice, and that means regular participation in local parent development centers, is not optional. If you care about your child you must be willing, no ego and passionate about meeting with other parents on a regular basis, to engage, challenge and learn together with the guidance and support of experienced mentors. There is no other way.

The early child care network represents the best possible environment for this development to take place. Ideally they have created a true play-ground for children ('play' being the optimum state for learning and 'ground' being a sanctuary or safe place for this optimum state to express). And, simultaneously, this same environment is a living laboratory for continuing adult education and personal development.

The Nurturing Project provides this national neighborhood-based network with the structure, resources and community support needed to begin this process – and to do so at no cost to parents or providers. www.nurturing.us does a good job of describing the model.

8. ANY CLOSING THOUGHTS ON THE TOPICS OF CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION?

Place knowledge, like a ball, in the play state and it operates one way. Allow knowledge to run mechanically and it operates quite differently. It is absolutely essential that we reconnect and embody the state where real intelligence, creativity, innovation act upon the data that now controls our lives. When we begin remember, regain and experience the difference between the state of authentic play and our normal state brimming with conditioned reflexes, we have take the first step. Take your cues from children. Watch them dig tunnels to China. Watch them build sand castles by the sea shore. Watch them sing and dance and make up stories. Look at today with beginners mind, as if it were the very first time. Give all of your attention to whatever you are doing, sipping tea, feeling the wind blow through your hair. Cultivating and expanding this attention is a spiritual practice. It is the only way back to the kingdom.

Michael writes and speaks internationally on the *Next Frontier in Education*, *The Intelligence of Play*, *Transcendent Mentoring of This And Future Generations*, *Media and the Brain*, *Corporate Exploitation of Children*, *The Brave New World of Un-Schooling and Home-Schooling*, *Seven Principles that Transform Adults and Children*, *The Childlike Mind*, *Rational Imagination*, *Raising Children in a Sport-Crazed Culture*, and other topics.

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