

Video Transcript

Where Good Ideas Come From by Steven Johnson

For five years now, I've been investigating this question: Where do good ideas come from?

This kind of problem matters to everyone. We want to be more creative. We want to come up with better ideas. We want our organizations to be more innovative. I've looked at this problem from an environmental perspective. What are the spaces that have historically led to unusual rates of creativity and innovation? What I found in all these systems is that there are these recurring patterns we see constantly repeating, and they are an essential component of building an environment conducive to creativity. One pattern, I call the slow hunch, is that creative ideas never come at a moment of great insight or through a sudden moment of inspiration, but on the contrary, most important ideas take a long time to develop and evolve and they may spend a long time dormant in the background. It may take a good idea 2-3 years and sometimes 10-20 years to mature then it suddenly becomes accessible to you and useful to you in a certain way and this usually happens because good ideas come from the convergence between intuition and small ideas so that they form something bigger than themselves.

So, you see a lot through the history of innovation, such as cases of innovation from someone with half an idea. There is a great story about the World Wide Web and about Tim Berners-Lee who worked on this project for 10 years but when he started he did not have a complete vision of this new medium he was going to invent. He started working on a side project to help him organize his own data but he cancelled the project after a few years and started working on another project. After about 10 years his vision of the World Wide Web crystalize. That is more often than not, how ideas happen; they need time to mature and they spend a lot of time in this slow formation stage based on intuition.

The other thing that is important when you think about ideas is that when ideas take form in this "hunch" state they need to collide with other hunches. Often times the thing that turns a hunch into a real breakthrough is another hunch that is lurking in someone else's mind and you have to find a way to create systems that allow these ideas to come together and work together and turn into something bigger than the sum of the parts of these ideas. That's why, for instance, the coffee house in the Age of Enlightenment or the salons of modernism in Paris were the engines of creativity because they created a space where ideas could mingle and be exchanged to create new things and ideas.

When you look at the problem of innovation from this perspective it sheds a lot of light on the debate of what the Internet is doing to our brains. Are we getting overwhelmed with an always connected, multi-tasking lifestyle and is that going to lead us to less sophisticated thoughts as we move away from the deep reading model? I am a big fan of reading but I think it is important to remember that the great driver of scientific and technological innovation has been in the historical increase in connectivity in our ability to communicate through reaching out and exchanging ideas with other people and to use their little ideas and combine them with

our little ideas and turn them into something new. That really has been, more than anything else, the primary driver of creativity and innovation in the last 600 or 700 years. Yes, it is true that we are more confused and distracted today, but what has happened over the past 15 years which is a wonderful thing is that we have so many new ways to connect and to reach out and find other people who may have that missing piece that will complete an idea we are working on, or stumble upon an amazing new set of information that we can use to build and improve our ideas; that's the answer to the question, "Where do good ideas come from?" Chance favours the connected mind.