



GERALD
HÜTHER

Co-creativity and Community



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Before we get started

... It took quite some time before I gradually realised that I had been searching for something all my life – something that everyone else all around the world has always been searching for, too.

Like all small children, even as a baby I must have noticed that just a little smile from me was all it took to make my mother's eyes light up. And when I managed to produce that effect, everything was fine, and I was happy, too. It didn't take much effort and always seemed to work like a charm – with my mother, my father, my grandparents and anyone else who carefully and tenderly leaned over my pram. I can only imagine the boundless energy with which I tried out everything new. And just about everything I did, everything I learned as I expanded my repertoire step by step, made my parents happy. In turn, their happiness sparked my own desire to discover and create.

But then one day the inevitable happened: all of a sudden, not everything I did or said seemed to spark that wonderful feeling of happiness in those around me. Sometimes it was a bit too much for them, sometimes it just wasn't the right time or place, and sometimes Mummy and Daddy were downright annoyed. It seemed more and more of the things I did weren't what they had expected or hoped for.

And so the bliss of my carefree childhood gradually came to an end, and my parents began the task of my upbringing.

Like all children I tried my best to make them happy, tried to be “a good boy” and live up to their expectations. Not because I had to; it was important to me, and I was happy when I succeeded. But the feeling of unadulterated joy that had once flowed through my entire body now took on something like a bitter aftertaste. The carefreeness and the unbridled enthusiasm I had enjoyed as a little explorer and inventor were no longer free of ulterior motives. I now had a goal to pursue and my efforts were focused on a result that needed to be achieved: namely, that my parents stayed happy with me. The joy I felt when I occasionally succeeded was now mixed with the fear that I might lose their affection and with it my sense of security and connectedness with them, if what I learned or achieved failed to measure up to their expectations.

Back then, this fear could have easily continued to grow and I could have tried harder and harder to escape it. Then my desire to discover and create, to learn and acquire new skills and abilities, would have been increasingly reduced to simply learning all those things expected of me or hoped for by those I felt I belonged with, felt connected to or somehow dependent on. I would quite likely have become a smoothly functioning person. One who did his best to be recognised and liked by others, first by his parents, then by other kindergarten children and school teachers, fellow students and friends, and later by his co-workers and superiors. I might even have managed to gather so much knowledge and outstanding expertise in a specific field that I could make a real career out of it, gaining me the respect and admiration of all those who were busy doing exactly the same thing. Whether I would have had more success or a bit less, in any case I surely would have been happy about everything I had achieved. The fear of being left all alone, of not fitting in, and of losing my sense of security would have then been transformed into contentment, perhaps even pride.

Thankfully, that never happened. Perhaps because even in my childhood there were a handful of people who simply liked me the way I was, and whose affections didn't depend on whether or not the things I chose to learn and try, the things I was interested in, matched their own tastes and expectations. And perhaps those who were responsible for my upbringing weren't so worried that I might never amount to anything and instead had faith that I would eventually find my own way. Maybe they didn't have any other choice because they simply didn't have the time to worry about every little thing I did. In any case, I had opportunities enough to give the little discoverer and creator in me free rein, to try out all kinds of things and find out for myself what I was best at, and to focus on those things that interested me most. In the process I learned so much and enthusiastically picked up so many skills that I managed to survive my school years with no real harm done.

I then chose to study biology because I was fascinated by all living things, and would eventually become a neurobiologist because I wanted to understand why people think, feel and act the way they do.

Back then, I still thought this was because of our brains and the genetic programmes that control their development. It took quite a bit of time before I realised that that isn't true, that there is no genetic programme that controls the formation of highly complex interconnections between the billions of nerve cells in our brains. I was there for the exciting phase in which neurologists discovered that over the course of a lifetime the brain essentially "wires itself." The phenomenon, which they dubbed experience-dependent neuroplasticity, simply means that the formation of networks and connections within the brain depends on how a person uses their brain, and what for. And that in turn depends on what seems most important in that person's own lifeworld, what they open themselves up to, what moves them most, what they enjoy, what they are looking

for and what they hope to achieve. As such, the kind of brain a given person ends up with isn't determined by any blueprints or programmes. It's much simpler than that: our brains structure themselves on the basis of the solutions that we find over the course of our lives while searching for – yes, I suppose I can use the expression once, even if it's not entirely accurate – what makes us happy.

And since what makes a given person happy – which also includes anything that helps them cope with difficult situations – varies greatly from individual to individual and from the time they're born to old age, we all end up with correspondingly different brains, with which we think, feel and act differently.

It took a long time before I grasped that. I had spent so many years, read so many books, attended so many conferences, conducted so many experiments, written articles and led discussions, all to find out how these highly complex networks in the brain, which shape our thoughts, feelings and actions, are formed. And all the while I had assumed that the answer to my question could only be found in the brain itself. But then I was forced to realise that all our knowledge of how the brain is structured – which connections and networks, which transmitter systems and receptors it is home to and how they work – still couldn't explain why a given person's brain developed the way it did.

To find that out, I would have needed to research what type of lifeworld the person had grown up in and into over the course of their life, what problems and obstacles they encountered and what experience they had gained while searching for solutions. I would have needed to determine whether (and if so, how) they had succeeded in satisfying their own needs, in pursuing their interests, discovering what there was to discover in their world, and in shaping their life the way they wanted to. And if in my research I had stumbled across people who had experiences in their childhood or later in life that were painful,

disheartening or damaging, I should have not only asked which consequences these experiences had on the person in question's further developmental process, but also whether (and if so, how) they could have been avoided. Then I would have much sooner come to the conclusion that the most important experiences in our search for happiness are experiences with other people – and unfortunately not just the types of experience that encourage them, that reinforce their own desire to discover and create, and that satisfy both their longing for independence and freedom on the one hand, and for a sense of belonging and security on the other. And I would have quickly realised that the ways in which we interact, how we shape our relationships, isn't all that it could be. And I wouldn't have wondered for so long why we find so many disturbed relations and tangled connections between the nerve cells in various regions of the brain in so many people. Then, instead of trying to use cutting-edge scientific methods to determine what was going wrong up there from a neurochemical, neuroanatomical or neurophysiological standpoint, I would have started doing what I could with my humble means to help improve relationships between people.

But then again, this seems to be a fundamental principle of the human quest for knowledge: that we don't realise we're on the wrong path until we're utterly lost in the woods. And it's equally true that we sometimes have to take a wrong turn before we can recognise the right way to go forward.

And so I not only began to develop an interest in the relationships that shape the development of the neurons in our brains in the form of synaptic connections and neural networks, but to increasingly concentrate on the question of the nature of relationships between human beings, why they are the way they are, and how they can be changed.

In the process I noticed how many parallels there are between the brain and a human community. Just as we use language to communicate, neurons produce specific substances

in order to pass on their excitement to others, or to brake their activities. Just like communities, our brains are home to individual members, i. e. neurons, with broad networks of contacts that each can use to influence several others. There are regional networks responsible for the completion of certain functions, and there are overarching networks that in turn coordinate their activities. Further, just as in human communities, the relational patterns between the neurons of the brain are constantly disrupted and have to be rearranged if the disruption can't be done away with.

Needless to say, just as in a society, some relations in the brain are formed that, while suitable for solving a given problem in the short term, prove to be a major hindrance to long-term development. Sometimes what is going on in the frontal lobe no longer meshes with what the networks of the brain stem need to fulfil their own duties. In a society and in the brain alike, it can come to such a massive state of confusion that simply nothing works. When this happens to someone's brain, we send them to a psychiatrist. As for a society that has reached this point, its only hope is that it can muster enough energy to restructure its relationships on its own. If not, its own dysfunctional relationships will all too easily be passed on, not only to its children, but also to all other communities it comes into contact with.

I found all of these parallels so remarkable because they indicated that there was something like an overarching principle that dictated both the nature of relationships between the members of a social system and that of our brains.

This principle is currently being intensively researched by system theoreticians, i. e. by scientists whose work focuses on the structuring of complex systems. They refer to it as the "principle of self-organisation", and in recent years biologists have found more and more indications that the formation and maintenance of living systems can also be understood as self-organising processes.

Accordingly, I sought to transfer these modern concepts to the formation of relationships between human beings within communities. If the relationships between the living organisms in an ecosystem, the residents of a city, or the neurons in our brains are self-organising, the result will inevitably be a relational network of such a nature that the individual members remain as autonomous as possible, but remain interconnected. In the context of human societies this not only means that something is gradually formed that links all of the members while simultaneously reinforcing their autonomy; it also means that whatever connects them must be something that the community itself, through the process of forming the relationships between its members, generates and continually refines. Any community that fails to do so will fall apart. This process usually begins when a community grows inflexible and loses its creativity and ability to evolve because it no longer gives its members any room to breathe.

This “room to breathe”, which human beings need in order to grow and evolve, is the pleasure they take in thinking – something we all inevitably lose when forced to live in a society only held together by some form of external or internal pressure. When at some point this pressure subsides, there is suddenly nothing left to hold the members together and strengthen their sense of belonging and importance. Sooner or later, these members lose the desire to create and build things together, and each only looks out for him- or herself. That’s what I’ve discovered in my attempts to find what it is that determines which experiences we gain in our relationships with other human beings – and which relational patterns are consequently created in our brains in the form of synaptic connections and neural networks.

Communities in which the members have lost their joy in thinking are just as poorly suited to releasing the potential every individual holds as are those that have robbed these individuals of their desire to work together. Both phenomena make people

sick and destabilise the community in question. But since we cannot live alone, without other people, we have no choice but to work together to find some form of relationship that links us together, while still allowing each of us to freely develop his or her own innate potential.

No genetic programme will aid us in this task, nor will some all-powerful genius arise to lead us and show us how to shape our relationships so that neither our children nor their children will lose the joy they feel in creating things together; that's something we have to discover on our own. We've been trying to do so from day one, but have never truly succeeded. That being said, we have learned a great deal in the process. Never before have we known so much, and never before have we possessed stores of knowledge that were so massive or accessible to so many people – not yet everywhere in the world, but at least in those parts of it where people's thoughts and actions aren't primarily shaped by hunger, suffering and misery, nor by violence and repression. Wherever human beings come together without fear, without being blinded by some ideology and of their own free will, they can seek to shape their interactions differently than in the past. They can form small islands in the form of communities where no one has to lose the innate pleasure in thinking for themselves, and where people can start working together to shape their future gladly and freely – and not because everything is already just as they like it, but because they have found in these communities exactly that which all of us, everywhere around the world, are looking for. That's why I chose to write this book.

I would like to invite you, encourage you and perhaps even inspire you to give some thought – together with other people and at home, at work or just the next time you go for a walk – to the question of how we can rediscover our own joy in thinking for ourselves and creating together with others. And not by simply trying harder, but by attempting to find new ways to look at