

“SOUTH of NORMAL”

Between the idea and the reality, between the motion and the act falls the shadow – Eliot, “The Hollow Man”

One of the most frequent questions I am asked is, “Where did you get the idea for that program?” Or, “How did you think of that solution?” At the core of these questions is the basic curiosity, “Where do ideas come from?” And that...well, that is a GREAT question!

My standard answer is that my ideas come from just a little “South of Normal”, that place occupied by daydreams and pondering. It’s somewhere distant from objectivity and metric standards. It’s the playground of wonder. Its street might have addresses such as Imagination, Dumb Luck, Process, Evolution and Inspiration. To me, it is the only place that really matters. That shouldn’t be a surprise to you, if you know I have a twenty-two-year-old company built entirely on intellectual equity. For us, ideas are everything. Ideas are our separators and differentiators. Ideas are our value.

So, this special “South of Normal” place... “How do I get there?” is the next question in this string of inquiry. That’s another great question and I actually do have an answer for it. You see, ideas come through an actual process, although “process” is probably too formal a description. Think of it as a loose method, something not as firm as a math formula or a chemical equation, but still a working of connections.

First, you have to be open to finding, or getting to “South of Normal”. The starting point is as simple as that. You would be shocked at the people and organizations that don’t value new ideas. Being open to new ideas starts with a conscious effort, a level of commitment to inspiration (I was hoping to avoid that word, but

it was never going to happen. The problem with using the word “inspiration” is that it begs the question, “Where does inspiration come from?” Damn, it’s a vicious circle, this idea thing!).

Inspiration comes from knowing stuff. The extraordinary writer Warren Ellis describes it like this:

“I flood my head with information—anything, and lots of it. I then slosh it around the area that normal people use for remembering to pay bills, make appointments and think of sex. The info then hits a critical mass. One piece connects to another, that connects to another and eventually an actual idea forms. At that moment you are holy, you can’t be touched. Your brain gets lit up with a holy fire.”

That, my friends, is a great way to understand the origin of inspiration.

Moving farther down the streets of South of Normal you will find the address of Informal Process.

Songwriter David Weiss, who penned both the music and lyrics to What a Wonderful World, starts his informal creative process with any simple question, for instance, “What happens when people first meet?” This opens the door to his thinking rooms and the next thing you know a song is born.

Stephen Bechtel of Bechtel Construction knows all about informal process. The folks at Bechtel are the giants of the construction business. Hoover Dam and the Alaskan Pipeline are typical of the projects they have built that have changed the contours of our planet. Bechtel’s imagination is fired by arduous, challenging projects—the more impossible the better. His famous informal process is to recognize that size is good. “Simply move the decimal over one and start to dream.”

Weird, huh?

I think it’s really difficult to identify a specific set of steps that can generate an idea. If a magical process existed, could anyone write a sonnet, or paint a meaningful picture, or develop a nano-technological way to clean fat-clogged arteries? It takes a combination of lots of factors to generate an idea, to find new ways of seeing things. So, to answer the original question, here is a summary of my map to a place a little “South of Normal”:

- Be open to new things. Philip Adams said, “Most people can do extraordinary things if they just have the confidence to learn something more or take a risk. Yet most people don’t. They sit in front of their TV and treat life as if it goes on forever.”
- Put more “stuff” in your head. Give it some time to slosh around and connect. Dr. Roger von Oech said, “Knowledge is the stuff from which new ideas are made.” No “stuff”, no ideas.
- Find a simple informal process that works for you. In the past I have suggested you keep an idea journal. That’s still the most simple and powerful process for documenting and retaining your good ideas.
- Finally, DO SOMETHING! An idea is a treasure, but its real value is in its application. An idea’s success or failure (often the same thing), its change and growth are elements of its unique life cycle.

So there you have it: my convoluted and messy answer to my most frequently received question. Now to answer the second most-asked question: NO, I’ve never had the hiccoughs! ☺