

Inspiration You Can Use: Connecting Practice, Community and Culture

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“*Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away.*

— Maya Angelou



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When you hear the word “inspiration,” what comes to mind? A poetic muse? A lovely sunset? Your reaction to a heartfelt speech or testimonial? What “inspires” you, and where does that lead? Do you simply embrace the moment of inspiration, or do you take action of some kind in response? Does inspiration even matter anymore? Historically, inspiration has been the catalyst for creative activity. However, with the rise of the internet, social media, and at-your-fingertips information, is the concept still relevant?

For a word so commonly used in our lexicon, *inspiration* has received very little attention in the world of professional psychology. And no wonder: like other virtues, such as forgiveness, compassion, and altruism, it is a difficult concept to define and even more challenging to quantify. Another reason may be that the professional lives of most psychologists are consumed with any number of issues that feel anything but inspirational. Whether we are early in our careers, at mid-stage, or senior psychologists, the daily tasks associated with billing, marketing, CE, etc. can be so consuming that thinking about “inspiration” is probably an afterthought – if, indeed, we think of it at all.

This focus on work-related tasks may be exactly why we should consider inspiration as a key element of our professional lives. In any season of a psychologist’s life, concerns related to the challenges our profession faces can be overwhelming. We would suggest that it is the psychologist’s availing him/herself of opportunities to be inspired, and acting on that inspiration, that serve as a useful counterpoint to the quotidian stressors facing most of us. In this article, we examine the concept of inspiration: what it is, what the literature tells us about it, and how we can use it to sustain and expand our professional lives.

What Is Inspiration?

We often use words like “inspiration” as if we know what they mean, but do we really? Inspiration, like many other positive emotions, along with virtues and pro-social behaviors, received scant attention in the pathology-minded psychology literature until the advent of positive psychology in the late ‘90s (Seligman, 1998). In a qualitative study, Hart (1998) interviewed 70 participants to explore some of inspiration’s core

characteristics and components. He identified four phenomenological characteristics based on his examination of the data: (a) connection, which involved moving from a sense of self separateness to a greater sense of connectedness with the self, others, nature, an idea, or some aspect of the divine; (b) openness, an availability and receptivity accompanied by a sense of being filled; (c) clarity, which might involve either a heightened sensory awareness, greater understanding, or both; and (d) energy, which involved a powerful shift in mood and level of arousal. Regarding the last characteristic, Hart noted that energy could at times be manifested in immediate action, while at other times it may be the impetus to “direct one’s energies in a particular direction” (p. 20). However, Hart was careful to distinguish inspiration from motivation and pointed out that it does not always result in a tangible form of expression (i.e., a work of art). Hart went on to discuss how inspiration might be cultivated, recognizing that it cannot necessarily be willed and that the salience of potentially inspiring content will vary according to individual meaning structures and experience.

Thrash and Elliot (2003) published the first quantitative experimental study to address the construct of inspiration, and found (not surprisingly) that it is somewhat idiosyncratically experienced, and can be derived from external or intrapsychic sources. What one person finds inspirational may leave someone else unaffected; furthermore, we know very little about

what leads people to act (or not) when they do feel inspired. In order to better understand the construct of inspiration, the authors broke it down into three salient elements: evocation, transcendence, and motivation. *Evocation* is defined by the authors as an experience of inspiration that is not initiated by an act of the will but is evoked; *transcendence* is defined such that inspiration directs one’s attention above usual concerns and towards better possibilities; and *motivation*, which involves the energization or direction of behavior.

These researchers replicated the above study, and validated their tripartite model of inspiration, in several subsequent studies showing that inspiration is strongly correlated with positive affect and motivation (Thrash et. al., 2010). Nevertheless, there is as yet no research that attempts to address the reasons *why* inspiration is evoked in some people, in response to some stimuli (internal and external, positive and negative), but not in others. Secondly, inspiration is as yet poorly differentiated from other positive emotional states (awe, admiration, reverence), and what makes it unique as a catalyst for dedicated action is not clear. What we would suggest is that a clear theoretical, empirically testable framework be developed that captures the affective and phenomenological aspects of inspiration. Further, it would be useful to better understand the complex relationship between self, inspirational stimulus, and action/behavior change.



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“ Focusing on our routines is necessary to maintain stability, but personal and professional growth are most associated with thinking “outside the box” ... ”

How We Become Inspired

The question of *how* we become inspired necessarily begins with *who* is most likely to be inspired. In their development and validation of the Inspiration Scale (IS), Thrash and Elliott (2003) found that a frequent precursor to the states of positive emotion and transcendence is “openness to experience.” Since inspirational stimuli are often externally derived, those who are most open to in-the-moment experiences are most likely to become inspired. Inspiration, however, is to be differentiated from other affective states, such as ecstasy, awe, joy, etc., in that it portends an additional *philosophical* content, in which the immediate experience of positive emotion is also connected to one’s core values. This becomes the *transcendent* aspect of inspiration: one not only experiences a strong affective

response, but it is connected to an internalized matrix of personal values that then motivates the individual to take some kind of action.

This point of embarkation into some action based on the inspiration-generating stimulus is crucial. Inspiration does not exist in a vacuum, but is dependent on the context in which it is experienced, and on the existing schema of the inspired person’s life. The sense of inspiration one may feel in a beautiful natural setting or in exposure to information that excites the intellect, or in awareness of events that stimulate one’s sense of social justice – just to name a few possible examples – is fulfilled only in some form of prosocial behavior that carries the inspiration forward. Perhaps the pause to admire the sun setting over the ocean leads a person to a commitment to exercise better self-care. The psychologist at a CE workshop is exposed to a new and intriguing idea which then leads her to try something different in her practice. The same psychologist is moved to engage in community or professional advocacy after being inspired by a lecture on social justice, or bearing witness to a trauma. These few examples may all be borne out of somewhat different affective responses, and they demonstrate an activation of inspiration that varies contextually – but they all have in common an initial affective stimulus that is followed by new action, or a change in behavior.

Inspiration as a Catalyst for Growth

Who would argue that inspiration is not a good thing? We think of the word as synonymous with the mind being expanded and the self being energized. Yet, who has time to get inspired when there are so many other pressing priorities? How does one “get” inspired when the inspiration theorists will say that it must come as a function of “evocation,” and cannot be forced? And let’s say that one does reach an emotional/energy state that meets the criteria for inspiration – then what? Do you become in some way obliged to take action, and if so, how do you determine what to do? We offer some suggestions for cultivating and activating inspiration, based upon findings from research in the area.

- **Consider your own history of inspiration.** Thrash and Elliott (2003), in one study, asked subjects in one group to write about their personal experiences of being inspired. These subjects were significantly more likely to endorse subsequent stimuli as “inspirational” than those in the control group.
- **Practice mindfulness.** The literature strongly suggests that “openness to new experience” is a critical component of one’s availability to inspiration, and the practice of mindfulness – in meditation, yoga, or other psychospiritual practice – is an excellent way to achieve this.
- **Think beyond yourself.** Our personal and professional lives can develop a rhythm of their own, such that we develop a primary focus on the tasks and responsibilities associated



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with daily living. Develop a mechanism to “think beyond,” so that when inspiration strikes, you have a sense of where to take it.

- **Embrace inspiration as an element of growth.** Focusing on our routines is necessary to maintain stability, but personal and professional growth are most associated with thinking “outside the box” – again, the characteristic of openness to new experience. Look for opportunities to be inspired and take action as a function of your own lifespan development and personal growth.

Conclusion

In conceptualizing the convention theme, it is our hope that inspiration will trigger feelings of compassion in us, and if the inspiration is “strong” enough, this will lead to compassionate action. We hope that in every convention workshop, people will hear something that will resonate with them sufficiently so that in their own lives, in their own practices, they will convert what they have heard into action. In particular, we hope that more psychologists will feel moved to work together with CPA to defend and protect those people whose rights and freedom might be in jeopardy. We planned programs to provide inspiration, so that no matter where you work, you will have some things new and also practical that you can use on Monday morning. Admittedly, the social justice and diversity

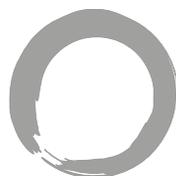
programs offered at Convention will take the long view, but we hope that you will be inspired enough to pick up the phone, or send an email and contact some group somewhere to talk about offering some time or money to help with the type of socially relevant work that resonates with you.

We want this to be a community effort, one that continues beyond convention and inspires others too. Therefore, we encourage you to tell us what you did in “The Week After Convention,” that you would not have done had you not attended. At Convention, we will be sharing with you ideas about mechanisms for this – and in so doing, we hope that your experience will serve to inspire others.

May you be inspired. ■

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