

A big chunk of our community just returned from Stetson's Educating Advocacy Teachers (EATS) conference. If you have never been, you should go. I feel sad when I leave the conference but there is also another feeling I easily find within me. I leave feeling inspired. And because I left EATS feeling inspired, I decided to do some immediate research on the psychology of inspiration for this month's blog. Being a writer and photographer has taught me something about myself: I need a muse. Something. Some trigger to spark the kindling of my desire to do something artistic. Being a professor of trial advocacy has taught me something else: If I want my students to get up and wow me with a tragic tale or a searing argument, they must *first* be inspired to make one. That bare need to complete a school-day task won't suffice.

I promise a point at the end of this story. Before my honeymoon, I had never been to the Rockies. I grew up on the leveled shores of Lake Erie where the sun spills its paint on a flat palette of gray water that trails away quickly from wherever you stand. There's very little contour to anything and even the clouds themselves often seem to lay like laundered sheets on the bed of the earth. I've been a serious photographer for probably 16 years now, but on my honeymoon in the Rockies, I was as new to a camera as I was to my marriage—two lifelong romances at their points of ignition. I had a few disposable cameras with me and through their lenses I began to see the world as light. This now seems to be the principal way in which my eyes work, but it began here. And it began because the bland, stretching waters of Lake Erie are lazy with good light. The Rockies, however, are not. They cut the light. Shape it. Bless it with shadows. Toss it around like discovered gold. If Lake Erie is a flat palette fading from view, the Rockies are the easel and the painted canvas.

On the third or fourth day of harsh summer sunlight, storms rolled in and over the peaks, and the sawed teeth of the range tore them up and discarded them in the eastern skies. All this right when the sun paced low upon the ridges of their western edge, claiming in orange and pink light a gaudy victory from the sullen rains. On the diving mountains to the east I discovered, right there and for the first time, "dappled light." Those deep-hued greens of mountain pines clutching the running shadows but giving them up to the racing pools of warm sunset, like a spring thaw. Filling the damp and moody pines with summer glow as if saving them from even thinking about winter. The sides of the mountains shimmered while the western skies crumbled, and the heat of the whole display burned off in me some blinkered view of the world that is a feature of the smallness of youth and its confining geography. I clicked my camera's shutter and became a photographer. Sometimes, when I want my students to chase after an inspired word, I tell them to think about light. Not to search through the concept of it, but through all the archived memories of light they have. There is always at least one piece of light in there that layers the ethereal over the terrestrial, piercing our earthly vocations and turning us all, if even for a moment, into artists.

Within the science of inspiration, we find a few of the precepts we would imagine to be there. Much of the literature on inspiration reaches back through the work of two of its most diligent researchers, Todd Thrash and Andrew Elliot. Their seminal work on the subject, and the subject of this month's blog, is an experiment-driven attempt to strip inspiration down to its bones and generalize a construct for a psychological view of inspiration.<sup>1</sup> Through a host of experiments I couldn't begin to break down in our small space, the authors arrive at the three largest pieces of inspiration: evocation, motivation, and transcendence.<sup>2</sup> I offer a broad summary of the research to our community so that we might better understand how our students work and how to target the inspiration that they *need* in order to work *well*.

According to the authors, inspiration's three characteristics work as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Todd M. Thrash & Andrew J. Elliot, *Inspiration as a Psychological Construct*, 84 JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, no 4, 2003, 871-889.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 871.

*Transcendence* refers to the fact that inspiration orients one toward something that is better or more important than one's usual concerns; one sees better possibilities. *Evocation* refers to the fact that inspiration is evoked and unwilled; one does not feel directly responsible for becoming inspired. Finally, inspiration involves *motivation* to express or make manifest that which is newly apprehended...<sup>3</sup>

Inspiration seems to operate like a bank account. There must be some kind of income before there can be any expenditure. The authors say inspiration is triggered “by an epistemic event in which new or better possibilities are revealed by, or revealed in, an evocative stimulus object” and they call this process “illumination.”<sup>4</sup> However, not all inspiration produces that “expenditure” toward some goal or object. Thus, the authors point out that one may feel inspired by the sight of the Grand Canyon but not then feel an inspiration to paint the Grand Canyon or write the next great western novel about northern Arizona.<sup>5</sup> This suggests to us as teachers, coaches, and mentors that whatever we choose as inspiration for others needs to create motivation toward some outlet for the feeling of inspiration we've just generated. And we need to be quick about it! The authors found that inspiration was most likely to produce a consequence (an expenditure!) on the day it occurred rather than the day after.<sup>6</sup>

Does there seem to be a discernible process to inspiration? Yes, say the authors:

We propose that inspiration is a hybrid construct that emerges from the juxtaposition of two component processes, one involving an appreciation of and an accommodation to an evocative object (hereafter referred to as being *inspired by*), the other involving motivation to extend the qualities exemplified in the evocative object (hereafter referred to as being *inspired to*).<sup>7</sup>

I like the specifics the authors use here: *Appreciating* and accommodating whatever is evocative to us and then *extending* those qualities of that object. If I give my students an artful section of closing argument from Gerry Spence, I want them to see the genius of him pointing out that even if a company is located in countries X, Y, and Z, it will never speak language X, Y, and Z because those tongues are foreign to the only language that company actually does speak—the language of money. I want them to extend the qualities of this metaphor into their own argument. They have to become memorable advocates. And don't we all say the same basic things to our trial advocacy students? “When your jury deliberates, they should be quoting to each other the things you've said to them as if they were creeds.”

I said at EATS that in this blog space I often toss out big questions like grenades and then run away from whatever landing they might have. I feel inspired to finish the same way here. So, I end with this: Let's leave aside our students or mentees for a moment. Where can we find more inspirational income as we get closer to the expenditures of our school year? What can we find to be *inspired by* that we may then be *inspired to* extend into ourselves and then into our teaching or coaching? You've already unlocked a memory, haven't you? Well, don't wait on it. Chase the light of inspiration before the day vanishes over its own glowing peaks.

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<sup>3</sup> Todd M. Thrash & Andrew J. Elliot, *Inspiration: Core Characteristics, Component Processes, Antecedents, and Function*, 87 JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, no 6, 2005, 957-973 at 957.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 959.

<sup>5</sup> *See id.*

<sup>6</sup> Todd M. Thrash & Andrew J. Elliot, *Inspiration as a Psychological Construct*, 84 JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, no 4, 2003, 871-889 at 885.

<sup>7</sup> Todd M. Thrash & Andrew J. Elliot, *Inspiration: Core Characteristics, Component Processes, Antecedents, and Function*, 87 JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, no 6, 2005, 957-973 at 958.