

Inspiration Can Be Found in Many Places, but You Need to Be Looking

By MICKEY MEECE

SUCCESSFUL inventors, entrepreneurs and writers say they are often asked where their big ideas came from.

They will acknowledge that serendipity often plays a role. But equally as important, they say, is having an open mind — especially in tumultuous times like these. Big and small ideas are out there, they say, if you are looking for them.

Consider the experience of Lopa Mehrotra, who was studying to be a political scientist. One hot summer day, she said, she was watching her 6-year-old daughter outside playing.

“Look,” her daughter said, as she scraped two gray rocks on stone and watched them turn white. “It’s magic.”

“I said, ‘Actually, it’s science,’” Ms. Mehrotra said recently, explaining how that moment inspired her to create TestToob.com, a social networking site that allows students to showcase scientific experiments.

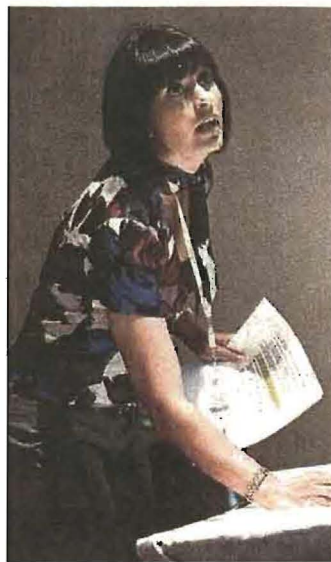
Jacques Heim, who founded Diavolo Dance Theater, was in Aspen with his dance company, using an elementary classroom as a dressing room. Naturally, it was full of toys, he recalled. He saw a box of blocks, including three in particular that caught his interest: identical five-sided pyramids that created a cube. “I was inspired by the geometry behind it,” he said, “and played with it for months.”

Ultimately those cubes led to a performance piece called “Foreign Bodies,” set to music by Esa-Pekka Salonen, music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Members of Diavolo, based in Los Angeles — gymnasts, actors and dancers — use everyday objects, like doors, stairs and chairs for dramatic movement, as well as the three mobile pyramids for “Foreign Bodies.”

His choreography, Mr. Heim said, is influenced by what he can see, feel, touch and hear.

“I believe if you have the child inside you and you walk down the streets, things happen to you,” he said. “Intuition. That’s how I op-



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From left, Jane McGonigal, a game designer; Lopa Mehrotra, creator of TestToob.com; and Kris Kimel, founder of IdeaFestival, gave tips to entrepreneurs and creative thinkers who attended the festival last month in Louisville, Ky.

erate.”

Diandra Leslie-Pelecky, a physics professor, said she got her idea when she was changing the channels one day and happened upon a Nascar race. Without warning, she recalled, one of the cars hit an outside wall. None of the cars had bumped, she said, and there were no engine failures or flat tires. So what happened?

It was not idle curiosity. To solve the problem, she immersed herself in racing by spending time with pit crews, crew chiefs, mechanics and drivers, and eventually wrote, “The Physics of Nascar.” The book traces a race car from its design to its race to the finish line.

Sometimes, Ms. Leslie-Pelecky said, she finds herself on the track and thinks, “How did I get here?” It is because of her “pit bull gene,” she decided. “When you get to a problem, you don’t let go until you solve it.”

(The answer to the mystery of the Nascar crash, by the way, was that a trailing car had changed the shape of the air-flow over the first car, which in turn had reduced the downward air pressure on it, causing its wheels to slip as if it were on ice, and it skidded into the wall.)

Ms. Mehrotra, Mr. Heim and Ms. Leslie-Pelecky were invited to share their moments of inspiration at the 2008 IdeaFestival in Louisville, Ky., last month, created by Kris Kimel after he had his own “Aha!” moment.

Mr. Kimel was in Park City, Utah, in the late 1990s, he recalled, and witnessed the success of the Sundance Film Festival. Why not, he thought, have a diverse festival that celebrates ideas?

And so, in 2000, he helped create the IdeaFestival, which brings together creative thinkers from different disciplines to connect ideas in science, the arts, design, business, film, technology and education.

The goal, according to the festival’s promotion, is to promote “out-of-the-box thinking and cross-fertilization as a means toward the development of innovative ideas, products and creative endeavors.”

It is not your typical “business day,” said Mr. Kimel, who works with small businesses. And that can be frustrating.

Whether it is a festival, a concert, a speech, a convention or a book, creative thinkers say, you have to actively look for inspiration, and that takes time.

Carving out time to find inspiration may seem unrealistic to a small-business owner working 90 hours a week. But Mr. Kimel said it must be done to find and keep a competitive edge.

“You cannot afford to say, ‘I don’t have the time to get out of my little circle here to understand what’s going on,’” Mr. Kimel said. “You can’t make the mistake of thinking the only place you’ll learn is from colleagues who are doing exactly what you’re doing.”

But what if you are not creative? “Hang out with creative people who are interested in the kinds of things you hope to contribute to,” advised Sandy Goldberg, an author and philosopher. Mr. Goldberg suggested, “Don’t neglect thinking when you’re not thinking,” for example, on a run.

When people ask her about how she comes up with an idea, Jane McGonigal, a top game designer and future forecaster, tells them, “You have to systematically expose yourself to things outside your domain because the breakthrough ideas will come from areas where you are not constrained by doing the daily job.”

Then, when you come up with an idea, or, as Ms. McGonigal put it, “you feel a connection to something,” then, she said, “deep exposure is a prerequisite.”

“Otherwise, you are doing what others in the field have done and it won’t be a breakthrough.”

As a researcher of alternate reality games, Ms. McGonigal focuses on how games can help the real world. In her research, she has also found a connection between gamers and the science of happiness, which led her to an moment of inspiration. “Games give you new models for looking at the world,” she said. They are the “ultimate happiness engine,” because they work better than reality — there are better instructions, better feedback and better community.

Ms. McGonigal stumbled on positive psychology and sensed it was important. The challenge was to bridge the gap between games and reality. That is the focus of her work for the Institute for the Future.

“It was a light-bulb moment” as a game designer, she said, “because I realized that making things work well matched up perfectly with happiness research.”

In the end, Ms. McGonigal said her experience and research taught her this: “We don’t have to be famous or rich. But we have to be good at something. We are happiest when we are applying our signature strength.”

Pursuing Big Ideas

Innovators at the 2008 IdeaFestival offered the following suggestions on how to come up with new ideas:

1. Think when you are not thinking, for example, on a run or walk.

2. Listen to classical music, go to a concert or a play or sit quietly in a park to daydream.

3. Read periodicals you would not typically read — a scientific magazine, for example, if you are more interested in business. Same with books outside your typical genre.

4. Attend a conference outside your field.

5. Surround yourself with creative thinkers.

6. Immerse yourself in a problem; ask questions, investigate possible outcomes.

7. Keep an idea journal.

8. Take a course to learn a new language or some other skill outside your expertise.

9. Be curious and experiment.

10. Articulate your idea, seek feedback, put structure on it, harvest it.