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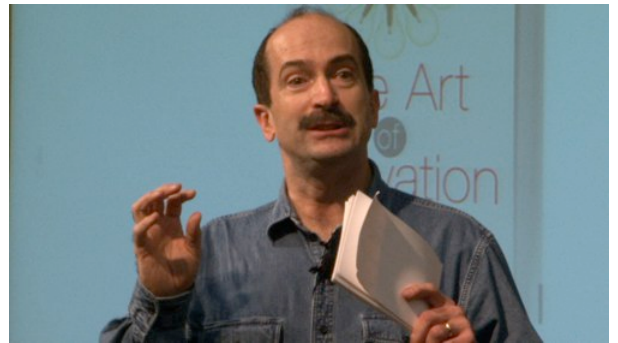
Orbiting the Giant Hairball

Tom Kelley, *IDEO*

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Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/2098/Orbiting-the-Giant-Hairball>

IDEO's General Manager Tom Kelley relays a tale about artist and author Gordon MacKenzie. In his book, "Orbiting the Giant Hairball", MacKenzie asks school children from kindergarten through sixth grade if they consider themselves to be artists. While the enthusiasm for creative free expression seems to run freely for the youngest children, the author notes some attrition from the idea starting with the second graders, and full-blown shame for artistic expression by the time he speaks to the sixth grade. The take-away from this exercise, says Kelley, is that we are all born with a high level of innovation, but it is the cultural norm to have these aspirations and pleasures flattened at a surprisingly young age. Kelley assures his audience that it is, indeed, OK to be an artist.



Transcript

One of my favorite books on creativity and innovation is by a guy named Gordon MacKenzie, it's called "Orbiting the Giant Hairball". Anybody ever read this book? Not too many. Currently out of stock at the Stanford bookstore, in case anybody is interested in dashing over there to get it. But anyhow, Gordon MacKenzie, great guy, he was an artist. He worked most of his career at Hallmark Cards but he's an artist. And he made these really funky but fun sculptures he welded together out of rusted steel. And what he would do is, he spoke to a lot of school groups, I mean grade school groups. And he was prepared to do, I'm not sure I would be prepared to do, which is he was prepared to speak to each class individually. Which is to say he started with the kindergarten kids in the morning, he spoke to the first graders, the second graders, the third graders and the fourth graders until he got to the sixth graders late in the day. He must have been really tired by that point.

He started the same way with all of the groups. He started the same way and he said, "Look, I'm an artist and I love to be around other artists." He says, "I look at your walls and you've got art on the walls so there must be artists here." He says, "Anybody here an artist?" And he's asking the kindergarteners, right? And some of you can remember kindergarten, others you can remember kindergarten for your kids. And what do kindergartners do? Everybody in the class is up like this. "Yeah, yeah! I'm an artist! I'm an artist!" Everybody in the class is an artist. They're not just an artist, they're an enthusiastic artist. And so he does that again of the first graders and still every hand is up. Not as much dancing around, not as many double hand raises but everybody's still an artist. And he says you get to the second grade was where you have your first little bit of attrition. Not every single kid raised their hand. You get to the third grade, the fourth grade and the fifth grade, end of the day he gets to the sixth graders.

And these kids are old enough to understand this. He asked the question about who's an artist and when he asked the question of the six graders there's only two hands go up. And the kids raising their two hands, they're looking around kind of nervously to see if they're going to be judged by their peers. And so Gordon MacKenzie asked the six graders, he says, "Hey!

What happened to all the artists in this school?" He says, "Did all the other artists transfer out?" He said, "Did all the other artists go to art school?" He says, "I don't think so." He said, "I think something much worse." He said, "I think someone or something has told you it's not OK to be an artist." And he said, "If you don't remember anything else I say today," he said, "I want you to go home and remember it's OK to be an artist." And so this is part of my message today; it's OK to be an artist. It's OK to be an innovator. It's OK to be a design thinker even if it causes people around you to raise their eyebrows.