

Someplace Pure

By CAROLYN HADLOCK



Once read in an article that people are their most creative between ages four and seven. After the age of seven there is a steady decline in imagination. I'm pretty sure that was true for me as well. Interesting—that's generally when formal education begins.

Not surprisingly, many years later, as a creative director for an ad agency, I find myself learning how to unlearn in order to find that pure place that children inhabit so effortlessly. And you know what? It's hard. It means aggressively searching out all the expected, easy, clichéd places and then walking away. But before you even get to that part, you have to do the business equivalent of the dishes, the laundry, and taking out the trash. Ironically, the first phase of unlearning is learning.

I've watched people clean toilets to learn about a cleaning product. While doing research for an online ratings and reports service, I saw a woman cry because her husband died and couldn't do home projects anymore. I've seen macaroni and cheese boil over because a mom was answering our questions about carpet cleaning. I've spent countless hours logging hundreds of mundane observations that could eventually become creative solutions, ad campaigns and, sometimes, pure magic.

I have seen tall tales when I looked at a giant printing press; flowing gowns when I looked at a faucet; newscasters when I observed nuns. I have seen my partners look at hamburgers with a brilliant 16-year sitcom in mind. I've seen them imagine awning installers as eloquent experts in shade, and hand-me-downs as high fashion.

I've met inexperienced kids, right out of school, with anemic portfolios, and imagined them as designers, art directors, writers—geniuses. As a mom, I've seen my four-year-old look at cardboard boxes and plastic and see a pirate ship. I've watched my 10-year-old look at a plain flower then sit down and write the most amazing description of its beauty.

I wonder what place other people go to in their minds to imagine the unimaginable—to prepare for the concept that, hey, maybe this rock is round and not flat after all, the theory of relativity, or the Apple iPhone. How did Marc Bolan of T.Rex come up with the line, "You're built like a car. You've got a hub cap diamond star halo?"

I always want to laugh when someone asks how we come up with stuff, or what our creative process is. For me, there is no creative process. It's more about getting someplace pure. That's not always easy.

Oftentimes, there are roadblocks along the way and we get stumped. This is usually a result of too many distractions—too many e-mails, phone calls, and meetings to attend. After seeing our initial ideas for a campaign, David Young, my creative director at the time, told my writing partner and me not to come back to the agency until we had "the best damn campaign ever."

Eight restaurants, five parks, and three days (and sleepless nights) later, we arrived back at the agency to present our new idea. He smiled at us, nodded, and said he knew we could do it. That was 14 years ago, and today, it's still one of my favorite campaigns.

Getting away doesn't always mean just physically leaving the building. It means shutting down the mental traffic in your head. When you see a great idea and ask the person how they came up with it, they often say, "I've no idea. It just popped into my head." That's when you know you've arrived at someplace pure.

Carolyn Hadlock is creative director at Young & Laramore Advertising.