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Mind Tools: Applications & Solutions

## **Doing the Right Thing for the Wrong Reason: Invention & Autonomic Processes**

by  
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On March 14, 2025, *The New York Times* published a belated obituary of a prolific inventor, Beulah Henry (1887-1973). In her time she was called the Lady Edison.

She says this about her process: “I have come to believe in spirit control. And I’m sure that the ideas that flock into my mind in the early hours of the morning are messages from a guiding spirit.”

To me, this is an example of an erroneous belief that nevertheless produces a successful result. It succeeds because it leads her do the right thing (pay attention to spontaneous mental activity), even if she does it for the wrong reason (the mistaken notion that a guiding spirit has taken her under its wing).

There’s much biological and logical evidence to support the idea that insight arises through autonomic organic processes. There’s none to support the idea that it comes through the mediation of a guiding spirit. At best, her belief is a metaphoric description of a novel experience one is struggling to explain—like an aboriginal culture’s mystical explanation of a solar eclipse (because that’s the best interpretative framework they have).

If we look at the world through the scientific lens of structure, we see in all things an integrated hierarchy of coherent systems—each system proceeding with economy of action toward a balancing of its elements, and simultaneously serving as a functioning element of a larger balance-seeking system that is one level above it. (The universality of this hierarchical balancing principle is more miraculous than any local intercession of a spirit guide; and more believable, unless one sees the spirit guide for what it is: a poetic personification of an

all-pervasive structural principle that extends even into one's mental life.)

From a systems perspective, creativity and invention are not something out of the ordinary. The mental events we associate with them are the autonomic behaviors of cognitive systems working to balance themselves; the products of economic optimization as it plays itself out in the hierarchy of the neurological structures called “mind.”

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If we focus on a thing for a while, think about it, and try to understand and/or manipulate it, there will spontaneously flow into our consciousness a sequence of mental events of unpredictable content.

Some events are sensations, the mind's registration of the (first-order) sensory responses that our nerve endings make to the stimulation of the thing itself. Others are ideations or feelings, the mind's registration of the (second-order) cognitive or emotional responses that the brain makes to those sensations. And still others are (higher order) ideations and feeling “about” the prior ideations and feelings; they are aesthetic judgments that the mind spontaneously makes about the coherence of the form it perceives in its collection of lower-order sensations, ideations, and feelings—i.e, its recognition of bad fit, gaps, contradictions, redundancies, and/or discontinuities within the collection. (These formal weaknesses steer the mind in its next direction, toward things that will improve the current form.)

What we are experiencing is a systemic balancing process; a feedback loop between neurological systems of different levels; an evolution toward formal elegance—toward beauty. It's hard to fathom that such a process is going on in within us, all of us, without our conscious guidance. No wonder Beulah Henry thought she was under the influence of a spirit guide of great intelligence. We're more than we know.

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