



Rethinking Creativity: A Symbolic Model of Multi-Domain Creativity, Affective Integration and Personality Function

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Abstract

Creativity has long been studied as a trait, a process, or a cognitive skill. But what if creativity is more fundamentally a symbolic function of the personality? This paper proposes a new theoretical model in which creativity is redefined as a structured process of symbolic engagement through which individuals form coherence across their identity, perception, and moral orientation. Drawing from personality theory, narrative psychology, symbolic cognition, and affective neuroscience, the model introduces four symbolic domains of creative expression; Cognitive-Structural, Symbolic-Narrative, Aesthetic-Sensory, and Moral-Participatory each of which reflects a distinct way of making meaning. These domains are sustained by four creative faculties: attentional depth, symbolic discernment, integrative synthesis, and generative commitment. Together, they form a dynamic system of personality development grounded in the integration of symbolic meaning over time. The model introduces a developmental “spiral of symbolic integration,” where the faculties interact cyclically to support transformation across domains. Additionally, it integrates emerging findings from affective science and psychedelic research particularly the work of Roland Griffiths which demonstrates that awe, reverence, and emotionally saturated experiences can lead to lasting increases in Openness and symbolic reorganization of the self. This framework not only unites disparate creativity theories but also lays the groundwork for empirical exploration. Proposed directions include psychometric development, narrative-affective profiling, and longitudinal tracking of symbolic transformation. The model has wide-reaching applications for education, therapy, leadership, and cultural renewal, offering a path forward in re-centering creativity as the architecture of human becoming.

Keywords: Creativity, symbolic cognition, personality integration, openness to experience, narrative identity, affective transformation, Griffiths, psychedelic research.

1. Introduction

Creativity has been a central concern of psychological theory for over a century, yet its definition remains fragmented. Most approaches reduce creativity to a trait (like openness), a cognitive ability (like divergent thinking), or a behavioural outcome (like innovation or artistic output). These views offer measurable insights, but they fail to grasp creativity’s deeper role in human development: its symbolic, integrative, and moral function.

In this paper, we present an exposition that creativity is not primarily a cognitive mechanism or dispositional tendency. It is a symbolic function of personality, the structured way in which the self-engages with reality to create coherence, purpose, and form. It is not what we do to produce novelty, but how we become whole through participation in symbolic meaning. In this light, creativity is not an isolated gift; it is the very architecture of human becoming. This model builds on the insight that human beings are symbolic agents. From early

development, we make sense of the world through narrative, image, ritual, metaphor, and moral structure. Our thoughts are not abstract computations but symbolically charged acts of interpretation (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) [9]. Our identities are shaped through life stories (McAdams, 2006) [12], and our long-term flourishing is tied to our capacity for generative action (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992) [13]. Yet most psychological models of creativity omit these foundations, focusing instead on isolated behaviours or casual novelty.

Even trait-based models, like the Big Five, which associate creativity with openness to Experience (McCrae & Costa, 1997) [14], offer only a probabilistic account. Peterson and DeYoung (2005) [3] advanced this by distinguishing between intellect and aesthetic Openness, but their framework does not explain how symbolic creativity unfolds, nor how it can transform personality across the lifespan. Crucially, emerging empirical research now supports the view that creativity is not a static capacity, but a plastic, developmentally responsive

symbolic function. In a landmark study, MacLean, Johnson, and Griffiths (2011) ^[10] found that a single psilocybin experience could induce a lasting increase of more than one standard deviation in Openness to Experience measured a year later. These changes were not pharmacological accidents; they were catalysed by experiences of awe, unity, moral insight, and emotional integration. As Griffiths *et al.* (2006) ^[5] emphasize, it is the meaning made of the experience not the substance itself that drives transformation.

These findings suggest that symbolic creativity can be awakened, expanded, and integrated especially when experiences carry emotional depth and narrative resolution. This empirical link between awe, symbolic reordering, and long-term personality change anchors the very heart of this model: creativity is the means by which the personality makes meaning, forms structure, and participates in reality. This paper presents a model of multi-domain symbolic creativity, organized around four symbolic domains and four enabling faculties. It introduces a developmental spiral to describe how these faculties interact to support identity formation across time. It further incorporates insights from affective science, narrative psychology, and psychedelic research to propose a new foundation for how we study, develop, and apply creativity in psychology, education, therapy, and culture. Creativity in this vision, is not a luxury or a metric of innovation. It is the slow, courageous work of becoming whole.

2. Literature Review

Creativity research has evolved through several dominant paradigm trait theory, cognitive models, developmental stage theories, and more recently, narrative and affective frameworks. Each of these has contributed critical insights, but none have provided a unified symbolic structure that explains how creativity functions as a process of personality integration. This section outlines the key contributions and the conceptual gap this paper seeks to address.

i). **Trait Theory and the Limits of Openness:** The most empirically robust personality correlate of creativity is Openness to Experience (McCrae & Costa, 1997) ^[14]. This trait includes curiosity, imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, and abstract thinking. Peterson and DeYoung (2005) ^[3] advanced the theory by dividing Openness into two dimensions: Intellect (verbal and conceptual fluency) and Aesthetic Openness (emotional and perceptual richness). These refinements allowed researchers to distinguish between abstract creators and sensory or artistic ones.

However, trait models offer static descriptions, not dynamic mechanisms. They identify who is likely to be creative, but they cannot explain how creativity changes a person over time or why some creative acts catalyse deep identity transformation while others do not. Trait theory also lacks symbolic depth, it does not explain how Openness interacts with values, purpose, suffering or moral vision.

ii). **Psychedelic Research and the Plasticity of Openness:** This gap was directly challenged by recent research in psychedelic psychology. In one of the most striking findings in personality science, MacLean, Johnson, and Griffiths (2011) ^[10] demonstrated that participants who underwent a single high-dose psilocybin session in a supportive, meaning-rich context experienced lasting increases in Openness to Experience often more than one standard deviation, sustained over a year.

These changes were not attributed to the pharmacology of the substance alone, but to the symbolic depth of the experience: the sense of awe, emotional clarity, sacredness, and moral insight. Griffiths *et al.* (2006) ^[5] reported that many participants considered the session one of the most meaningful experiences of their lives. Their narratives often reflected symbolic integration of suffering, story, and purpose.

This supports the thesis that symbolic experiences can reconfigure personality structure, particularly when they involve emotionally saturated insight. In other words, creativity is not just trait expression, it is a symbolic faculty that can be catalysed and restructured by emotionally and narratively charged transformation.

iii). **Cognitive and Associative Models:** Guilford (1950) ^[6] and Mednick (1962) pioneered cognitive models that defined creativity as divergent thinking and associative fluency, the ability to generate novel ideas by linking distant concepts. Wallas (1926) ^[18] introduced the four-stage model of creative process: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. These models remain central in educational and psychological applications.

However, cognitive approaches tend to isolate creativity from meaning, identity, and development. They track idea generation but ignore the symbolic, narrative, or moral content of those ideas. A person may be creative in form, yet fragmented in identity or direction. These models fail to explain why certain insights restructure the personality and others don't.

iv). **Narrative and Generativity-Based Approaches:** McAdams' theory of narrative identity (2001, 2006) ^[11, 12] offers a deeper insight: people do not just remember events, they construct life stories. These stories provide coherence, moral orientation, and future purpose. Highly generative adults often frame their lives in redemptive terms, and this storytelling itself becomes a creative act of self-integration (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992) ^[13]. Creativity here is not limited to art or problem-solving, it becomes the symbolic structuring of the self. When a life story is disordered, identity fragments. When the story integrates suffering into meaning, identity deepens. Yet even this theory focuses primarily on the narrative domain, leaving other symbolic dimensions like aesthetic perception or moral participation less developed.

v). **Symbolic Cognition and the Metaphoric Mind:** Lakoff and Johnson (1980) ^[9] demonstrated that human cognition is inherently metaphorical. We do not think in neutral symbols we think in terms of bodily, emotional, and spatial metaphors. Meaning arises from symbolic mappings across domains, not from logical rules. McGilchrist (2012) ^[15] expanded this into neuropsychology, showing that the right hemisphere supports holistic, symbolic perception, while the left dissects and controls. In symbolic creativity, the right hemisphere enables pattern recognition, metaphor, and contextual richness, all essential for discernment.

These theories suggest that the mind is built for symbolic creativity. But again, there is no system that maps how this symbolic capacity expresses itself across life domains or how it interacts with emotion and moral structure.

vi). **Summary: Toward a Symbolic Model of Creativity:** Across these paradigms, creativity has been studied as a trait, a process, or a behavioural output, but rarely as a symbolic function of personality. What is missing is:

- A structured set of symbolic domains
- A set of psychological faculties that support symbolic engagement
- A dynamic interaction model that shows how creativity reshapes the self
- Integration of emotion and meaning as catalysts for symbolic transformation

This paper addresses that gap. It proposes a four-domain, four-faculty model of creativity as symbolic personality function. It incorporates a developmental “spiral of integration,” where faculties cyclically support creative maturity. And it draws on empirical research including psychedelic studies to demonstrate that symbolic creativity is both measurable and formational.

3. Theoretical Framework

Creativity, as redefined here, is not simply the capacity for novel production. It is the symbolic function of personality how the self-engages with meaning through form, story, beauty, and ethical contribution. This model treats creativity not as a skill or trait, but as a developmental process of integration, in which the personality becomes more coherent, generative, and symbolically aligned.

This framework includes:

- Four symbolic domains of creativity
- Four psychological faculties that enable domain expression
- A dynamic interaction model, the Spiral of Symbolic Integration
- Affective foundations as catalysts for symbolic activation

Together, these elements form a system for understanding not just what creativity is, but how it forms a person over time.

3.1. The Four Symbolic Domains

Creativity expresses itself through distinct symbolic orientations, or domains. Each reflects a unique way in which the personality generates coherence and meaning.

- Cognitive-Structural Creativity:** This domain is concerned with abstraction, systems, and conceptual modelling. It appears in philosophy, theoretical science, mathematics, and metaphysics. It aligns loosely with Intellect (DeYoung *et al.*, 2005) [3], but its core feature is symbolic architecture: the attempt to map reality into mental order.
- Symbolic-Narrative Creativity:** This domain centers on time, story, and transformation. It is expressed in autobiography, myth-making, life review, and religious confession. McAdams (2001) [11] has shown that narrative coherence is central to identity. Here, creativity is not just expressive; it is the act of becoming through meaning.
- Aesthetic-Sensory Creativity:** Here, the personality engages the world through form, rhythm, beauty, and perceptual resonance. It includes music, visual art, ritual, design, and somatic expression. It resonates with Aesthetic Openness, but it is deeper than preference it is how emotional perception becomes symbolic form (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; McGilchrist, 2012) [9, 15].
- Moral-Participatory Creativity:** This domain is generative, ethical, and civic. It includes mentorship,

leadership, institution-building, and self-sacrifice for higher goods. Creativity here becomes moral action with symbolic depth. McAdams & de St. Aubin (1992) [13] and Ryan & Deci (2000) [17] frame this in terms of generativity and purpose. Each domain is a mode of symbolic formation. A fully developed person does not merely express creativity in one; they gradually integrate across all four.

3.2. The Four Creative Faculties

To function creatively within or across these domains, the personality must rely on deeper capacities faculties that support symbolic engagement.

- Attentional Depth:** This faculty allows the self to dwell in complexity without distraction. It enables incubation, contemplation, and emotional saturation. It underlies what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) [2] called flow, but with symbolic sensitivity.
- Symbolic Discernment:** This is the intuitive ability to recognize form, pattern, coherence, or sacredness in symbolic material. It is the “eye” of the symbolic mind. It allows for metaphor, archetypal recognition, and meaning perception beyond analysis.
- Integrative Synthesis:** This faculty joins opposites, resolves contradictions, and creates symbolic wholeness. It is the act of turning paradox into pattern often seen in breakthroughs, redemptive narratives, and aesthetic resolution.
- Generative Commitment:** The will to create meaning through sustained effort. This faculty drives vocation, sacrifice, mentoring, and long-term symbolic formation. Duckworth *et al.* (2007) [7] call it grit. Here, it is seen as moral-symbolic fidelity.

3.3. The Spiral of Symbolic Integration

These faculties do not operate in isolation. They spiral through one another in a developmental pattern that deepens symbolic maturity:

- Attentional Depth allows immersion in symbolic material
- This enables Symbolic

Discernment the recognition of deeper form

- Discerned elements are transformed by Integrative Synthesis
- This synthesis fuels Generative Commitment long-form creative becoming
- Commitment cycles back to deepen attention

This spiral is not theoretical it is observable. In Griffiths’ psychedelic research, participants consistently report:

- Sustained attention to interior symbolic space
- Perception of sacred or coherent symbolic realities
- Reorganization of identity and priorities

Moral renewal and purpose discovery (Griffiths *et al.*, 2006; MacLean *et al.*, 2011) [5, 10]

These transformations mirror the spiral process. They show that symbolic creativity is not fixed, it can be catalysed by emotionally and symbolically saturated experiences.

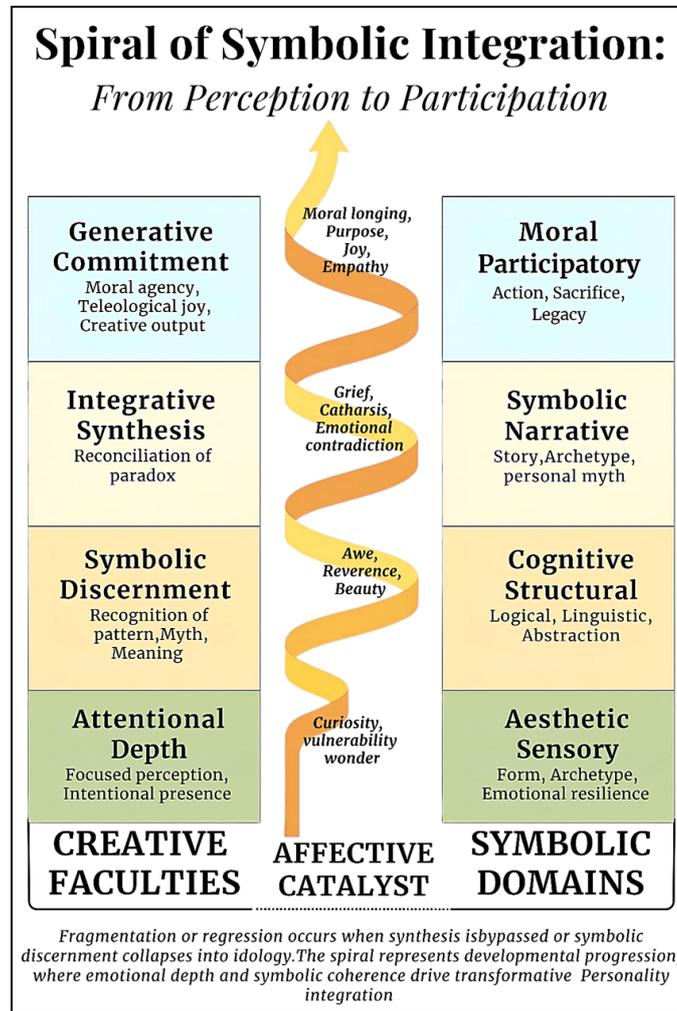


Fig 1: The Spiral of Symbolic Integration: From Perception to Participation.

3.4. Affective Foundations of Symbolic Creativity

Emotion is not peripheral it is foundational. Symbolic creativity begins when emotional energy saturates perception, revealing form, rupture, or possibility.

Table 1: Faculty - Affective Catalyst Symbolic Creativity Differences

Faculty	Affective Catalyst
Attentional Depth	Curiosity, vulnerability, wonder
Symbolic Discernment	Awe, reverence, beauty
Integrative Synthesis	Grief, catharsis, emotional contradiction
Generative Commitment	Moral longing, purpose, joy, empathy

Griffiths’ participants described awe, surrender, unity, and sacredness as central to their transformation. These emotions did not distract; they initiated symbolic reordering.

This model thus integrates affective science (Barrett, 2017; Keltner & Haidt, 2003) [1, 8] with symbolic creativity. Emotional intensity enables symbolic faculties to operate at depth. Without emotion, symbolic form does not activate.

4. Methodological Proposal and Research Directions

To move from theory to empirical validity, symbolic creativity must be rendered both measurable and developmentally observable. The goal is not to reduce symbolic functioning to numbers, but to build instruments that can capture structure, track integration, and map symbolic maturation over time.

This section outlines three converging methodologies:

- Psychometric development of the symbolic domains and faculties
- Mixed-method narrative-affective assessments
- Longitudinal and intervention-based designs for tracking symbolic transformation

Together, these methods make symbolic creativity accessible to researchers, educators, and clinicians without compromising its depth.

4.1. Psychometric Development: Mapping Symbolic Functioning

Two instruments are proposed to operationalize the model’s components.

i). Multi-Domain Creativity Inventory (MDCI)

This tool measures an individual’s engagement across the four symbolic domains.

Sample items:

- **Cognitive-Structural:** “I enjoy building complex ideas into coherent mental models.”
- **Symbolic-Narrative:** “I often reflect on my life as a kind of evolving story.”
- **Aesthetic-Sensory:** “I find deep emotional meaning in music, art, or ritual.”
- **Moral-Participatory:** “I feel responsible for creating something that will outlast me.”

Validation Steps Include:

- Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis
- Convergent validity with Openness and generativity
- Discriminant validity from IQ or social desirability

ii). Symbolic Creativity Faculties Scale (SCFS)

This instrument assesses the faculties supporting symbolic work.

Sample items:

- **Attentional Depth:** “I can remain focused on an idea or question even when it becomes emotionally intense.”
- **Symbolic Discernment:** “I often sense deeper meaning in stories or images before I can articulate it.”
- **Integrative Synthesis:** “I seek unity between ideas, values, and experiences that initially seem contradictory.”
- **Generative Commitment:** “I stay dedicated to meaningful projects even through suffering or delay.”

Each item reflects not just skill, but symbolic orientation and emotional readiness.

4.2. Mixed-Methods Research: Narrative, Emotion, and Meaning

Symbolic creativity involves the transformation of meaning. Therefore, qualitative methods are essential.

i). Narrative Identity Interviews

Adapted from McAdams’ life story method (2001) ^[11], these interviews can be coded for:

- Dominant domain expression
- Spiral engagement (faculty transitions)
- Emotional-schematic shifts (e.g., chaos to coherence)

ii). Emotion-Coherence Mapping

Participants complete affect-labelled prompts such as:

- “Describe a moment when beauty changed your direction.”
- “When have you experienced awe, and what followed from it?”

This enables researchers to link specific affective experiences with domain activation and symbolic reordering.

4.3. Longitudinal and Transformational Studies

Symbolic creativity is not episodic, it is developmental.

i). Longitudinal Tracking

- Use MDCI and SCFS at multiple intervals
- Track symbolic growth across life projects, identity changes, and meaning-making responses
- Correlate change with exposure to symbolic or moral challenges

ii). Psychedelic and Awe-Based Interventions

Griffiths’ work provides an empirical model of symbolic activation:

- Psilocybin + supportive setting = long-term increase in Openness, generativity, and meaning coherence (MacLean *et al.*, 2011) ^[10]

These findings support symbolic intervention methods:

- Guided retreat formats
- Symbolically-rich aesthetic experiences
- Narrative therapy with emotional depth

Pre- and post-measurement using SCFS and narrative tracking would confirm faculty development and domain expansion.

4.4. Research Hypotheses and Predictive Utility

This model supports clear, testable hypotheses:

- The four domains and four faculties are factorially distinct but dynamically related
- Higher symbolic faculty development predicts greater creative depth and identity coherence
- Emotional events involving awe, grief, or moral clarity activate symbolic discernment and synthesis
- Spiral activity over time predicts increases in purpose, well-being, and narrative integration

This methodological scaffold not only tests symbolic creativity but invites developmental and therapeutic interventions rooted in the symbolic nature of the person.

5. Applications and Theoretical Implications

If creativity is the symbolic function of the personality structured across domains, enabled by faculties, and animated by emotion then it has far-reaching applications. This model not only reframes how we understand personality and development, it also provides tools for education, therapy, leadership formation, and cultural repair. It shows that creativity is not an elite capacity but a foundational human process of integration.

i). Personality Theory: From Traits to Symbolic Structure

Traditional models view personality as a static collection of traits. The Five Factor Model, while empirically robust, flattens human experience into statistical averages. This framework restores symbolic dimensionality to personality:

- Domains reflect the person’s orientation toward meaning
- Faculties reflect their capacity for integration
- Spiral interaction reflects developmental movement
- Emotion provides symbolic ignition

Rather than reducing creativity to Openness, this model shows how personality forms through symbolic coherence, how the self becomes whole through story, form, beauty, and moral contribution.

ii). Identity Formation and Psychological Growth

McAdams (2006) ^[12] demonstrated that identity is built through narrative. This model expands that principle to show how identity is also shaped through symbolic structure in other domains:

- Aesthetic resonance
- Moral participation
- Conceptual synthesis

Psychological growth, in this view, is measured not only by adjustment, but by the integration of symbolic tension. A self that holds paradox, channels beauty, and sacrifices for truth is a creative self, not because of output, but because of inner formation. Griffiths’ research confirms this: participants described symbolic visions, moral realignments, and narrative transformations, not intellectual novelty, but existential reordering.

iii). Education and Curriculum Design

Education often rewards output and compliance but ignores

symbolic depth. This model calls for curricula that:

- Cultivate attentional depth (contemplative study, reflection)
- Foster symbolic discernment (literature, art, metaphor)
- Train integrative synthesis (interdisciplinary projects)
- Inspire generative commitment (mentorship, service, legacy work)

Rather than funnel students into predefined outcomes, education becomes the cultivation of symbolic personality teaching not just what to know, but how to become. Assessment shifts from mere skill to symbolic engagement: how students form meaning, perceive structure, and commit to enduring contribution.

iv). **Therapy and Symbolic Integration**

In clinical settings, symbolic breakdown often precedes psychological symptoms:

- Narrative collapse (e.g., trauma without meaning)
- Aesthetic disconnection (e.g., anhedonia, numbness)
- Moral drift (e.g., despair, nihilism)

This framework offers clinicians a map of where symbolic life has fragmented and how to rebuild it:

- Encourage clients to re-enter symbolic narrative through life-story repair
- Reawaken aesthetic faculties through creative practices
- Foster generative identity through commitment to causes or people
- Use the spiral to help clients reengage with attention, discernment, synthesis, and moral effort

Creativity, then, is not a bonus feature it is the deep structure of healing.

v). **Leadership and Civilizational Renewal**

We live in a time of symbolic fragmentation. Institutions crumble not from lack of intelligence, but from loss of coherence. Leadership, too, has become performative rather than formational.

This model proposes a new standard: the symbolically creative leader. One who:

- Thinks in structure (Cognitive)
- Leads with story (Narrative)
- Inspires through form (Aesthetic)
- Sacrifices with purpose (Moral)

Such leaders are forged not in management programs but in symbolic development. They mature through tension, create coherence under crisis, and build institutions that reflect truth, not trend.

If implemented, this model could inform:

- Leadership training programs rooted in symbolic literacy
- Institutional renewal built on aesthetic, moral, and narrative integration
- Cross-disciplinary collaboration structured around symbolic roles, not bureaucratic silos

In Summary, this theory turns creativity from a peripheral trait into a core framework of personality development. It restores depth to education, coherence to therapy, integrity to leadership, and vision to culture. By viewing creativity as symbolic function, we regain a psychology that does not merely describe life but participates in its unfolding.

6. **Conclusion**

Creativity is not an ornament of the mind. It is the central process through which the self becomes whole. In a world overwhelmed by fragmentation, disconnection, and performative novelty, this paper has argued for a return to creativity's deeper meaning: as the symbolic function of the personality, structured across domains, enabled by faculties, and animated by emotional depth. The model presented here reframes creativity as the interaction of four symbolic domains cognitive, narrative, aesthetic, and moral and four enabling faculties that spiral through attention, discernment, synthesis, and generative commitment. This structure is not theoretical ornamentation; it is an attempt to describe how identity forms, matures, and acts with integrity. We have also shown that symbolic creativity is not fixed. It is responsive sometimes radically to experiences that carry emotional weight and symbolic coherence. Griffiths' psychedelic research confirms what spiritual traditions and narrative psychology have long intuited: that awe, beauty, moral encounter, and story can reshape personality at its foundations. This model provides a way forward empirically, educationally, and existentially. It offers tools for research: measurable scales, developmental pathways, intervention models. But more importantly, it offers a vision of the person: not as a bundle of traits or a node in a system, but as a symbolic agent capable of becoming whole through meaning. Creativity, in this view, is not something you have. It is something you become. And to become truly creative is to participate in the sacred labour of symbolic integration the work of coherence, beauty, purpose, and truth. That is not performance. That is transformation.

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