

# *Unconscious Thought Theory*

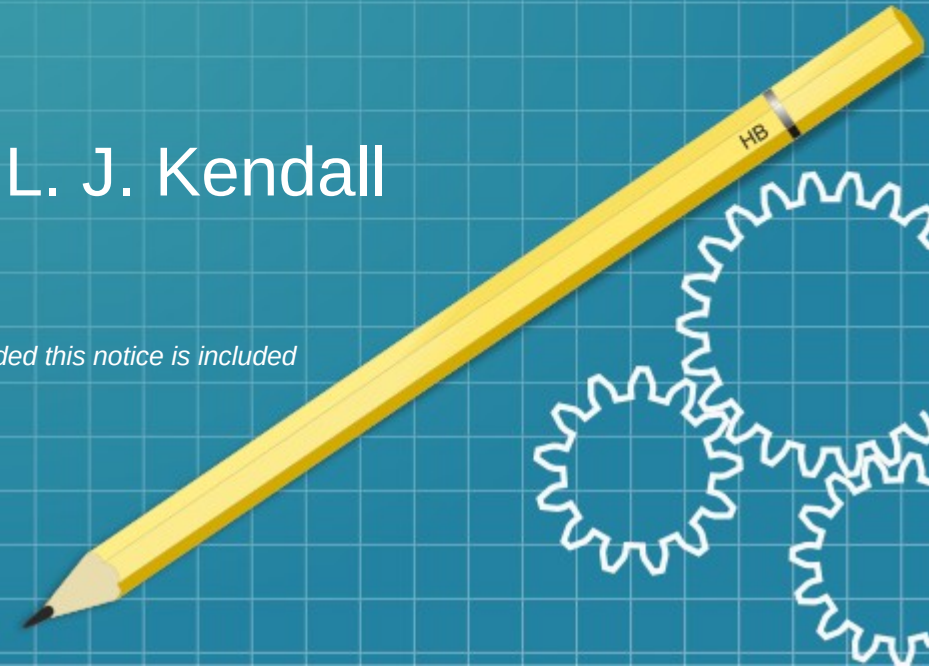
## as a Creativity Tool

21 slides

Conflux 2022 workshop, L. J. Kendall

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# Topics we'll cover today

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(Image from Andrés Nieto Porras)

- Why listen to me?
- How can UTT help in writing?
- What is UTT, and the science behind it
- Practical exercise (*part 1 of 2*)
- How did UTT work out for me?
- Do others use their unconscious for creativity?
- UTT for Writer's Block?
- Practical Exercise (*part 2 of 2*)
- My UTT tips
- Some further references



# Why listen to me?

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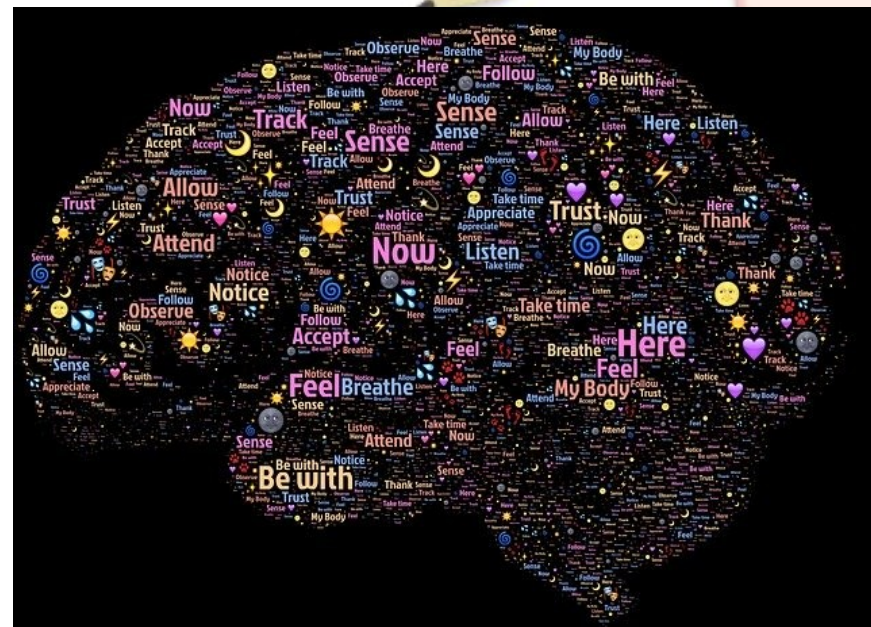
- Although I'm no expert on UTT, I may be one of the few people with experience in **consciously applying it to the writing process**
- From 1991-2015 I worked for Canon's Australian research centre. Around 2014, they paid for a full day workshop for thirty or so people on what **UTT** was and how it could be used in innovation.
- In 2014 my wife of 30 years died. A few months later I was retrenched.
- But thanks to a life-changing suggestion from an insightful career counsellor (**Karen Tisdell**), I decided to pursue my childhood dream of becoming an author.
- I had a 140k word MS I'd first drafted in 1993 and reworked off and on up until around 2005 when I just set it aside.
- Mid 2015, following advice from my editor in Ireland (**ThEditors**) that I had 2-3 books **ks** crammed into this single MS, I had a big problem:
  - after splitting it in two, I needed a new plot and climax for what had been the midpoint
- I found the solution by taking what I'd learned about UTT for innovation, and applying it to my creative writing.



# How can UTT help in writing?

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1. Plotting
2. Inventing
3. Restructuring a story
4. Coming up with twists
5. Solving continuity problems
6. Fitting new elements into an existing story
7. Overcoming some kinds of “**Writer’s Block**”
8. Escaping corners you may have painted yourself into



(image courtesy of Pixabay)


(NB: Have something to write a little bit ready, for later on...)

# What *is* Unconscious Thought Theory (UTT)?

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- It's a relatively new, and mildly controversial theory about unconscious thought processes
- It's grounded in science
- **My summary:** we have a rational, conscious part of the mind, and an unconscious part of the mind that works very differently.
- Key points:
  - 1 The rational part is more logical, analytical, and sequential.
  - 2 The unconscious part is good at finding patterns, making connections, and is highly parallel.
  - 3 We can consciously set our unconscious to tackle problems for us, provided we distract our conscious mind the right way at the right time.

(cont.) ... what is UTT? ...



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- German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer:
  - “One might almost believe that half of our thinking takes place unconsciously... I have familiarized myself with the factual data of a theoretical and practical problem; I do not think about it again, yet often a few days later the answer to the problem will come into my mind entirely from its own accord; the operation which has produced it, however, remains as much a mystery to me as that of an adding-machine: what has occurred is, again, unconscious rumination.”

# (cont.) ... what is UTT?...

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- A few references:
  - [A Theory of Unconscious Thought](#), Jun 2006 by Ap Dijksterhuis and Loran F. Nordgren; and in 2013 [First neural evidence for the unconscious thought process](#).
  - UTT began being applied in business contexts to help in things ranging from decision-making to innovation.
    - E.g. in 2013, [The Thought Leader Interview: Loran Nordgren](#) (which also links to a couple of videos with Nordgren.)
  - In 2017, this article suggesting the unconscious is [Not Merely Experiential: Unconscious Thought Can Be Rational](#)
    - That matches my own experiences since 2015, when I started using it as a writing tool




## (cont.) ... what is UTT?...

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- One of the first psychological experiments leading to UTT involved asking people to solve some real life problems like rating a set of apartments.
  - The experiment presented four apartments – one desirable, one undesirable, two neutral – and provided information like how big the apartment was, how old, whether it was close to public transport, hospitals and so on... twelve aspects across four apartments, giving a total of 48 pieces of information to absorb.
  - Then they broke up the people in the study into three groups.
    - 1 One group was asked to work out the best apartment rationally, in three minutes
    - 2 a second, to decide immediately.
    - 3 But the third group was distracted for three minutes then asked to decide.
- They found that only the 3rd group performed significantly better at choosing the desirable apartment.




## (cont.) ... what is UTT?...



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- Functional MRI studies have shown that when your unconscious mind is at work on a problem, up to fifty areas of the brain go active.
- In contrast if you're doing a logical task, there will be one or two parts of the brain active.
- The unconscious works in parallel, the conscious mind is serial, taking things one step at a time.
- The unconscious can process, store, and link large amounts of information; the conscious comfortably remembers about seven things at a time.
- The unconscious is very poor at working out logical stuff: it can't do arithmetic, it doesn't do if-then-else chains of reasoning. It's great at finding patterns and weighing up fuzzy pros and cons.
- Don't expect your unconscious mind to do your tax return for you.

## (cont.) ... what is UTT?



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The key idea of Unconscious Thought Theory:

- “Simply stated, people can either think about things or not. UTT adds the idea that we [can] think unconsciously.”

# Practical exercise (*part 1 of 2*)

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- With that in mind, let's try the technique right now. Grab that paper and pencil.
- Think about some problem you have that needs some creativity to solve
- Step 1: Write down, in bullet points, what you know about the problem
  - That consciously freshens up what you know about the problem
  - That information feeds into your unconscious and helps signal that it's something requiring attention
- Step 2: read over those notes
  - Add more points if they occur to you while doing this
- Step 3: think about the problem any way you like (logically, idly, ...) for just a little while
  - But if you do start thinking logically/analytically, be very wary of that
- Step 4: distract your conscious mind.
  - Do something that requires mainly rational thought, so you are consciously occupied and that part of your mind can't take control
- So take **three minutes** right now to make those notes about your problem
  - I'll keep talking to avoid dead air...
  - (What I say is all on the next slide: so don't worry, you won't miss anything)...
  - I'll wave when the three minutes are up, and you should start listening again!



# (Read this if you want a distraction)



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- Writing it down consciously freshens up what you know, and feeds it into your unconscious.
- You jot down whatever you can about the problem. That includes things like all the conflicting goals you're trying to achieve. I had a tricky plot point where I ended up listing six or more things I wanted to achieve, all at the same time. Write down the things you must have, and the things you must avoid. Or that you'd like to have, or avoid. Stuff that could be involved; including people.
- What about the tone of the solution? Write down some possibilities. Dramatic? Touching? Sad? Happy? How much time might pass – minutes, days, years? What resources do the characters have available? Basically, write down anything you feel could be relevant. If you were alone and working on your own time, you might also consider whether you've already made notes of ideas to consider later, fragments of things that could be useful to you one day – in which case you could dig out those old notes and read them. Or do some searches for helpful information that might factor in.
- Once you've written them all down, read them. You might think of extra details you want to factor in. You might have bits of inspiration already, ideas that feel like they might be pieces of the puzzle. Write them down.
- Once you feel you've got everything kind of piled up and buzzing around in the back of your mind, you can think about them in any way you like – rationally or not – for a little while. But if you find you've started to think logically about the problem, be very wary of that. Unless your gut instincts are telling you you're finally on the right track: if so, charge on ahead.
- At some point though, if you haven't solved the problem, especially if you feel you're going in circles, that's the point to stop. So at that point we want to stop the logical part of your mind from trying to calculate the answer, and let your unconscious mind get to work on it. By now it knows you want a solution to this problem, but it doesn't hurt to tell yourself that explicitly as well. Even write that down if you want. And then you distract your logical mind for a while so it can't get in the way.

# How UTT worked out for me

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- For my 1<sup>st</sup> book, following feedback from my editor, I had a BIG plotting problem to solve. Cue much fruitless struggle.  
Eventually, I thought to take the theory I'd learned about for business innovation, and try it.
- I did, and a few days later came up with a solution.  
Afterwards I realised, "Holy smoke, that worked!"
- I did the same again, later in that 1<sup>st</sup> book, to create what I tweeted as a 'horrifying teacher' idea
- Each time I tried UTT, it worked
- I did find though that the tougher the problem, the more time and thought it took
- Not knowing when the solution was there, I'd 'check in' every now and then by picking up my notes about it, re-reading them, and thinking some more, especially including writing
  - Sometimes I'd have nothing new; sometimes I'd add a few thoughts
  - I think this approach keeps your unconscious working on the problem
- For me, using UTT often feels like working on a jigsaw puzzle – sometimes *finding* pieces, sometimes *fitting* a few pieces together.
- I also find UTT removes some of that self-critical pressure: instead of beating yourself up for not having the answer *now*, you know you're feeling your way towards it


# Do others use their unconscious for creativity?

1 of 2

- Elizabeth Gilbert (*Eat, Talk, Pray*) gave a Ted talk about **the pressures of creative careers**
  - The notion that creativity comes **solely from the artist** only developed in the last 500 years
  - Before that, people believed it was partly external: **so the responsibility was shared**
  - She interviewed the great American poet Ruth Stone, who said poems approached
    - “like a thunderous wind barrelling toward her across the plains, a great storm. And unless she could get inside and get to a pencil and paper, by the time this mighty storm train of a poem crashed through her she would lose it.”
  - She interviewed Tom Waits. He spoke of driving, hearing a delightful melody. Unable to stop, needing to capture it before it was lost, he looked up to the sky and said:
    - “Excuse me, do you not see that I’m driving? Does it look like I can do anything for you right now? So, either you come back later, when I can give you the care and attention you need, or go and bother someone else; go and bother Leonard Cohen.”
  - Suffering her own experience of the same kind, and remembering what Tom Waits had told her, she turned to an empty corner of her room and said:
    - “Look, you and I both know this isn’t all just on me: I’m doing the best I can; I’m putting everything I have into this; but it needs the both of us. So if you’re not going to do your part... well, I’m going to sit here and keep working. But I’d like the record to show that I showed up for my part of the job.”
    - Acknowledging a spiritual – or unconscious? – dimension lets you share the creative burden.



# Do others use their unconscious for creativity?



2 of 2

- Anecdotes abound for the unconscious being used to solve creative problems:
  - James Watson’s dream of a spiral staircase (he and Francis Crick discovered DNA’s double helix)
  - Neil Gaiman talks of his ‘compost heap’, which he fills with random facts and ideas, and from which ideas flower.
  - Even our expression “I’ll sleep on it” is an explicit acknowledgment of the creative problem-solving abilities of our unconscious minds.
- If you search for ways to come up with story ideas, you’ll often find suggestions like using the I-Ching, or tarot cards...
  - which could be ways of tapping into a spiritual well of creativity.
- I basically agree – except I see that Well as being inside us, and the springs that feed it are everything we experience

# UTT for Writer's Block?

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- Some people argue “writer’s block” is a **symptom, not a cause**, not a thing in itself
- Of course there are lots of things that can interfere with or block your writing
- I’ve found that sometimes when I’ve been blocked, UTT has overcome that
- Now, for me, remembering all the elements for a scene or arc takes mental effort – until I write them all down.
  - Jotting them down removes that active mental juggling
  - I suspect it also helps store all the pieces in my unconscious
- I think writing them down primes the unconscious, so it can start seeing patterns, making connections, extrapolating
- Sometimes, although I had plans for what came next, I kept finding distractions
  - But when I stopped, and had time to let my mind wander, a great new idea came so quickly I suspect it had been my own unconscious feeding me distractions, to stop me taking a wrong path
- (Sometimes of course it was a real life problem that needed to be dealt with)



Image by Lance Cpl. Deseree Kamm, III Marine Expeditionary Force

# Practical exercise (*part 2 of 2*)



- Hopefully you've all now been sufficiently distracted that we can check back in to complete our workshop exercise
- Go back to the problem you posed yourself, and skim/read to the end of what you jotted down
- Now you have just 30secs to write something relevant: ideally, the solution
- Don't try to reason out the answer, just start writing
- I'm going to stop talking for a minute. (I'll wave when time's up.) Let's see how we all do.



# Group discussion



- Most problems take more than thirty minutes of (unconscious) thinking to solve
- There's a good chance your unconscious had already been at work on the problem if it was one you'd already been worried about
- How did we go – did anyone have a breakthrough?

# General observations

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- I think the unconscious is often also the source of lots of our ideas. The trick to using it is threefold:
  - 1 Just knowing it exists and you can use it to solve some kinds of problems;
  - 2 Feeding it enough raw materials for it to use to grab bits and pieces, to solve the problem;
  - 3 Then leaving a silent space for it to present its answer to you.
- *The best way to derail it: distract your unconscious with constant phone use!*
- I've found the more I use UTT, the more I get to know the feeling when it has something ready for me.
  - It's by no means obvious. At least for me, it's not a voice in my head that tells me the answer.
  - On some occasions I've even hit a block in my writing and discovered it was because my unconscious had an idea and it wanted to get it to my conscious attention before I continued. Otherwise I would have headed off in the wrong direction and made it harder to fit the new piece in.
  - On a couple of occasions I would have missed major improvements to the book I was writing.

# My Tips on Using UTT

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- Write stuff down
- Clear the decks of clutter
- Don't allow yourself to get daunted
- Allow yourself time
- Try and try again
- Trust your instincts
- Hunt for facts **if you feel you're missing some**
  - Everything you do and experience adds to the Aladdin's treasure cave of your unconscious
- I've blogged about UTT and creativity several times, probably in too much detail. But that may be helpful for anyone who'd like to read a more detailed example of applying the technique, and I **captured just such an example here ('the Marcie problem')**, which happened to me while writing book four in my series.

Humans are imagination engines, naturally generating ideas, like the sun generates light – it's what we do

Thanks for listening to me. I hope this workshop will prove useful for you.

# Some further references

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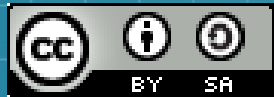
- The article that kicked it all off (about 45 very readable pages): A [Theory of Unconscious Thought](#), by [Ap Dijksterhuis](#) & [Loran F. Nordgren](#), University of Amsterdam
- An overview of incubation (sleep, shower...) and its underlying causes: [Creativity—the unconscious foundations of the incubation period](#)
- The nature of consciousness itself: [Passive Frame Theory](#) – suggests it's a kind of spontaneous symphony bubbling up:
  - “the information we perceive in our consciousness is not created by conscious processes, nor is it reacted to by conscious processes. Consciousness is the middle-man, and it doesn't do as much work as you think.”
- [This study](#) shows complex ideas can enter consciousness automatically.
- Exploring the elusive gap between anecdotal and empirical support for UTT in creative problem solving: [The Merits of Unconscious Thought in Creativity](#):
  - “unconscious thought cannot ‘create’ knowledge; conscious learning and thought process are needed to establish a knowledge base.”
- In case you're wondering: the company that provided the innovation training was called [Inventium](#). They have a few blog posts about UTT.

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(Luke's website: [A Toe In the Ocean of Books](#))







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