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— Training Manager, Nestle Purina



Prolific

The Art & Science of Collecting, Creating and Communicating Your Ideas

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SOFTWARE
AS A SERVICE
PLATFORM

by **Scott Ginsberg**

Founder of Personal Creativity Management (PCM)

INTRODUCTION

My primary motivation for writing was always to explain my own life to myself. To metabolize my experiences. To process my thoughts and feelings. To crystallize my understanding of the world.

In the past few years, however, I've sought out a more precise grasp of my own creative process. I've become insanely curious about the architecture around what the heck I do all day. Because my theory was, if I could just deconstruct what I've been doing rather intuitively and abstractly, perhaps it could be replicated more exactly and practically.

And so, I started retracing my steps. I went back to every song, album, book, business, blog, idea, website, movie, article, speech, project and piece of writing I've created in the past twenty years. I began searching for the principles that have been silently guiding my creative behavior. I started remembering all the tools that had been learned, internalized and forgotten.

And it worked. For the first time, I truly began to understand my own creative process.

Before long, system started to announce itself. Hence, this book.

But it's more than just a book, it's a curriculum. An intellectual property development system that unpacks the art and science of collecting, creating and communicating your ideas.

I'm really proud of it.

I hope it helps you.

-- **Scott Ginsberg, Brooklyn, NY**
January 2015

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



What happens when you wear a nametag twenty-four seven? Even to bed? Just ask Scott Ginsberg. In the beginning, it was just a gimmick to make friends. But soon, his crazy idea didn't seem so crazy. In the past fifteen years, Scott's social experiment has evolved into an urban legend, world record, cultural phenomenon and a profitable enterprise. Simply google the word nametag, and you'll see his work benchmarked as a case study on human interaction, revolutionizing the way people look at approachability, identity and creativity.

Since 1999, Scott has authored 30 books, released six albums on his own record label, published an award winning blog, created NametagTV.com, given a TEDx talk and delivered

presentations and corporate training programs worldwide. He also wrote, produced, directed and scored an independent concert documentary, *Tunnel of Love*. Scott is the only person in the world who wears a nametag 24-7. Even to bed. He was also inducted into Ripley's Believe It Or Not as the world record holder of wearing nametags.

To see why his work sticks, go to www.nametagscott.com.

Or just google the word "nametag."

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

ABOUT THE AUTHOR 2

PART 1 – INPUT: THE CREATIVE SEASON OF *INSPIRATION*

I. IDENTITY

1. Focus is about identity, not activity. 6

2. Create a self to express 9

3. Develop an exquisite understanding of your own timing. 12

4. Let your why drive..... 15

5. Carve a path back to yourself. 18

6. Commitment is the constraint that sets you free..... 22

II. FUEL

7. Sustaining originality of voice..... 25

8. Develop a repertoire of faithful forces..... 27

9. Activate the creative subroutine in your head..... 30

10. Help inspiration seek you out. 32

11. Create a unique, unreplicable inspiration pool. 35

12. Listen to what wants to be written. 38

PART 2 – THROUGHPUT: THE CREATIVE SEASON OF *ORGANIZATION*

I. ACTIVE

13. If you don't write it down, it never happened 41

14. Get the idea to ground zero..... 44

15. Is everything you know written down somewhere? 47

16. Never fall in love with your own inventory..... 50

17. Learn to work modular..... 53

18. Keep some of the process analog..... 55

II. PASSIVE

19. Dig your creative well before you're thirsty.....	58
20. Make peace with piecemeal.....	61
21. Walk the factory floor	64
22. Create medium agnostic	67
23. Wake up to what's been here all along	70
24. Look for an organizing principle	73

PART 3 – OUTPUT: THE CREATIVE SEASON OF EXECUTION

I. IDENTITY

25. Confront the realities of your creative inclinations	77
26. Find your bacon.....	79
27. Don't run from your limitations, leverage them.....	82
28. The power of polyamorous creation.....	85
29. Learn to render yourself whole.....	89
30. Updating the Story You Tell Yourself.....	91
31. Leave no asset unharvested	94
32. Touched by a hand, struck by a fist.....	98

II. ROUTINE

33. Peripheral creation versus principal creation.....	102
34. Primary and portable creative environments	105
35. More fully flesh out your work.....	109
36. Turning a seed into a forest.....	112
37. Tricking yourself into discipline.....	115
38. Inviting nature as your creative collaborator	118
39. Sending your creative rocket into the sky.....	121
40. Put your body into their memories	125

III. STRATEGY

41. It's Only A Matter Of Time.....	128
42. Prolificacy hinges on the power of one.....	130
43. Decide that you're never finished.....	133

THE PROLIFIC GLOSSARY	135
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PART 1 – INPUT:
THE CREATIVE SEASON OF
INSPIRATION

I. IDENTITY

1. FOCUS IS ABOUT IDENTITY, NOT ACTIVITY.

When I was a kid, I knew I was going to be a writer.

Because I already was one.

Writing wasn't my dream, it was my dominant reality. I can't remember not doing it. It was the only territory I could always go to. The only instrument I could always just play. The one activity that, when I did it, put me back together again.

If writing wasn't the answer, I rephrased the question.

That wiring never changed. Certainly, *what* I write, *whom* I write for, *how* I write and *where* I share my writing changed, and will no doubt continue to change with every phase of life. But ultimately, *why* I write will not change.

I'm reminded of an interview with renowned painter and illustrator, Gary Panter, a man who critics affectionately referred to as a "restless, hyperprolific artist, seemingly unable to do one thing at a time."

I thought to myself, this guy is my hero. Because for years, we've been poisoned by the fairytale that the secret to success is working with a laser beam. That we should not do a gazillion things at once, not have too many balls in the air and not start too many projects, lest we spread ourselves too thin.

But what's wrong with that?

I didn't know there was a straightjacket on human potential.

Truth is, most prolific creators worry that they don't have enough arms to do everything they want to do, so they keep all their passions in play, accrue as many hyphens as possible and diversify their work across multiple genres and mediums and arenas, while still staying true their dominant reality.

The other day I was listening to an interview with a successful cartoon voice actor. When asked about his work experience at a major television network, he said the best about his job was, *they used every part of him like a buffalo.*

We should all be lucky enough to work that way. Firing on all cylinders, making use of everything we are, exploiting talents we didn't know we had, keeping all of our passions in play, using our strengths to do what we do best and leaving no faculty untapped.

Proving, that focus isn't about activity, it's about identity.

It's about gaining complete clarity about who we are, refusing to be anybody else other than ourselves, embracing our natural inclinations in every situation and doing the only thing that feels right to us.

Brion Gysin disagrees with me. He's the calligraphist best known for his invention of the *dreamachine*, a flicker device designed as an art object to be viewed with the eyes closed. In his obituary, he was quoted as saying, "You should hammer one nail all your life."

Really?

Focus isn't about hammering one nail all our lives; it's about hammering lots of nails, *one way*, all our lives. It doesn't matter how many different things we do, it matters that we're the same person when we do them. In fact, tracing back the etymology of the word focus, it has the same derivative as the word *fireplace*, the definition of which means, "a point of convergence and a center of activity and energy."

Translation, focus is about putting our fire at the center of everything we do.

When I decided to go on summer sabbatical, I went in search of the next stone on my professional path and discern the future horizon of my work. During those three months, I read a book that had a profound effect on my decision called *The Startup of You*, written by Reid Hoffman, entrepreneur, venture capitalist and the cofounder of LinkedIn. His observations were as follows:

"Instead of locking yourself into a single career path, keeping your career in permanent beta, forcing yourself to acknowledge that you have bugs, that there's new development to do on yourself, and that you will need to adapt and evolve."

Eventually, I made the decision to stay true my entrepreneurial spirit, while still enlarging my concept of work itself. I ended up taking a full time job that allowed me to continue to expand my journey by day, while holding onto my own unique brand, business and artistic endeavors by night.

This couldn't have been a healthier path for me. Embracing the best of both worlds, holding down a day job, but also keeping all my passions in play by investing in multiple containers of meaning, was wildly satisfying. Because even though I changed my narrative to connote a different meaning, it was still one that remained true to reality.

Approaching the creative process in this way provides us with a stronger anchor and gives us permission to experience our entire spectrum of human ability. And as long as the basic ingredients are still the same, as long as we're staying true to our native wiring, the creative possibilities are endless.

Identity based, not activity based.

That's my theory. That your identity is your vector. That there's an undeniable direct link between who you are and what you make. Thoreau famously said the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. But let's not forget the other problem of leading a life of crowded misidentification. Charging through the world at such a volume and velocity that we never take the time to slow down and get in touch with the deeper currents of ourselves.

And I understand that not everybody reflects. Introspection and contemplation aren't second nature to a lot of us. But they're still part of our nature. Establishing a sense of identity is a central task in human development. In fact, that's what separates us from the other primates. The ability to figure out who the hell we are.

Especially as creators and communicators.

The artist's journey, ultimately is a journey of revealing to ourselves what we love and who we are.

So if you want to keep production going, keep your fingers on the pulse of your individuality.

2. CREATE A SELF TO EXPRESS

The creative *product* is subordinate to the creative *moment*, the creative moment is subordinate to the creative *process*, and the creative process is subordinate to the creative *life*.

And so, the question becomes, what does the creative life look like?

Howard Gruber asked the same question. He was a pioneer of the psychological study of creativity, most widely known for his books on the development of Darwin's thinking on evolution. But unlike many of his cognitive contemporaries, he rejected the notion of the elusive eureka moment, that great theories arrive in flashes of insight. With all due apologies to thunderbolts, he famously said, creative work is not a matter of milliseconds, minutes or even hours, but of months, years and decades.

Gruber presented a gradualistic view of creativity. That the creative individual was someone who acted at all times with knowledge, purpose and affect. Someone whose work flowed out of the world and back into it. In the intriguing book, *Notebooks of the Mind*, he takes a refreshingly existential and holistic approach to the question of imagination, riffing on what he called the regenerative possibilities of a creative life:

“A creative moment is part of a longer creative process, which in turn is part of a creative life. It's not a finite system that comes to rest when it has done good work, but one that urges itself onward. It's not a runaway system that accelerates its activity to the point where it burns itself out in one great flash. The system regulates the activity and the creative acts regenerate the system. The creative life happens in a being that can continue to work.”

Meaning, the job of a creator requires a commitment to a developing and continuing set of unending, interacting, interdependent and mutually modifying long range enterprises. In order to become prolific in our work, Gruber's [research](#) and case studies suggest a helpful set of attitudes called *the evolving systems approach*, which must be cultivated.

The approach is *developmental*, meaning our creative work evolves over long periods of time. The approach is *pluralistic*, meaning our creative work exploits not one, but many metaphors, relationships and projects. The approach is *interactive*, meaning our creative work exists within historical, societal and institutional frameworks, always conducted in relation to the work of others. And the approach is *experiential*, meaning our creative work is the product of our participation in the world's needs and feelings.

Not just the creative product. Not just the creative moment. Not just the creative process.

The creative life.

Joss Whedon is the poster boy for what the creative life could and should be. As a screenwriter, film and television director, producer, comic book author, cult icon, composer and actor, his contributions to popular culture are innumerable. He's the premier cult creator. Joss doesn't just make movies about superheroes, he *is* a superhero.

What's more, if you trace the trajectory of his work, it closely corresponds to Gruber's theory of this evolving systems approach. There's even a fascinating book called *Joss Whedon: A Creative Portrait*, which tracks his entire career arc. Consider these key characteristics of his life:

He was the offspring of two generations of television writers. He was a childhood fanboy of popular culture influences. He had apprenticeships and mentors and experiences creators to channel his curiosities. He valued making and leaving tracks as part and parcel of the process itself. He established social environments and peer groups for nurturing his work. He made grand goals attainable by inventing and pursuing subgoals. He developed an identity as a creative person with a sense of his own specialness. And he had at his disposal a number of modalities of representation.

Is it any surprise he's so prolific?

Understandably, few of us will ever experience the level of success and influence and significance of Joss Whedon. But his story serves as a template. It's a modern exemplar of how to build a creative life, from which the creative process, the creative moment and the creative product are natural outpourings.

I struggled with this in the early part of my career. As a writer, I romanticized the notion of constantly disappearing into my work. I coveted the fantasy of locking myself in a room and refusing to come out until the work was done. As a result, I seduced myself into thinking that isolation and detachment were necessary to become the artist I wanted to be.

But as my mentor so eloquently reminded me, *it's not enough to write something worth reading, you have to do something worth writing.*

Artists need to be interactive, reactive and proactive. Our first responsibility as creators is to be human beings, to be real people, whose unique reservoirs of life experience color the canvas with rich textures. We have to reengage with the world and procure

meaning outside of our art, even if that means battling our own antisocial tendencies. Otherwise, we never get out of our own heads. Our perspective remains myopic. And our work lacks the necessary spirit of humanness and ordinariness because we never spend time with other ordinary humans in ordinary places doing ordinary things.

I'm reminded of the classic book *Art & Fear*, which outlines the daily challenges and doubts, both practical and psychological, in making art. When the book was first published, it quickly became an underground classic. And with the help of massive word of mouth through online communities, it became among the bestselling books on artmaking and creativity.

The authors, two working photographers who grappled daily with the problems of making art in the real world, wrote the following:

“When you are lazy, your art is lazy. When you hold back, it holds back. And when you hesitate, it stands there staring, with hands in its pockets. But when you commit, it comes on like blazes. Your art is not some residue left when you subtract all the things you haven't done, it is the full payoff for all the things you haven't done. It's living your life in a way that your art gets done over and over.”

Ultimately, we can't self express if we don't create a self to express.

Art is subordinate to life, not the other way around. If you want to master the creative process, summon the creative moment and ship the creative product, start by living the creative life.

Everything else is secondary.

3. DEVELOP AN EXQUISITE UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR OWN TIMING.

Timing isn't everything, it's the only thing.

And the great creative discipline is simply knowing what season it is.

Which means much more than the changing of the leaves or the melting of the snow or setting your clocks back an hour. The word "season" actually comes from the French *saison*, which means, "the right moment, the appropriate time."

Our job as communicators, then, people whose work involves creating something and then turning it loose in the world, is to develop an exquisite understanding of our own timing.

Let's use breathing as an example. From a respiratory perspective, there are three possible actions: *Inhaling, pausing and exhaling.*

First, you inhale. You breathe in.

Your lungs inflate, sucking air in and pushing the ribs up and out, forcing the diaphragm down, inhaling fresh air. This action represents the season of inspiration. And when the air comes gusting in, it's your duty to shut up and listen to what wants to be written.

Inhaling, then, is your *content inspiration system*, or input.

It's how you stay inspired when your job is to inspire others. It's how you create systems to summon those innovative juices when you need them most. It's how you find fresh fuel for your fresh ideas. It's how you create a unique, unreplicable inspiration pool. It's how you help inspiration seek you out.

Each of these will be explored in great detail in part one.

Second, you pause. You standby.

Your lungs don't really deflate or inflate, they just sort of relax and run idle and take a brief look around until the body decides what to do next. This action represents the season of intermission. And when the respiration goes on hold, it's your duty to stay present enjoy the sacred space between.

Pausing, then, is your content management system, or throughput.

It's how you create medium agnostic. It's how you dig your creative well before you're thirsty. It's how you find organizing principles. It's how you unconsciously let the material work on you. It's how you get your ideas ground zero of production. It's how you process information and manage the creative workflow quickly and intelligently. It's how you capture your ideas. It's how you work modular through a granular process of fortifying your creative inventory.

Each of these will be explored in great detail in part two.

Lastly, you breathe out. You exhale.

Your lungs deflate, blowing air out and pushing the ribs down and in, pulling the diaphragm up, exhaling stale air. This action represents the season of creation. And when the air goes swirling out, it's your duty to honor the flow and work until the vein is out.

It's how you confront the realities of your creative inclinations. It's how you leverage your limitations. It's how you access your natural motivations. It's how you integrate the whole of your personality and experience. It's how you diversify your project workload. It's how you activate creative subroutines in your head. It's how you identify movement value. It's how you build micro and macro momentum. It's how you trick yourself into discipline. It's how you more full flesh out your ideas.

Each of these will be explored in great detail in part three.

Physiologically, each of these actions only lasts a few seconds. Unless you're a sea turtle who can hold his breath for seven hours. But psychologically and emotionally and existentially, each of these actions can last anywhere from an hour to a week to a month to a year. It all depends on what season it is in our creative life.

I'm reminded of what Einstein once said, that every occurrence, including the affairs of human beings, is due to the laws of nature. That's why I started believe in seasons. Not supernatural prophetic agencies like fate, serendipity, synchronicity, luck, the law of attraction and god's will. Nature's agenda. The geometric order and rhythm of life. You know, something I could actually *prove*. The more I ran my experiences through that logical filter, the more patterns started to emerge. Turns out, you can actually design systems and structures to align yourself with nature's timing.

And since there's not much we can do to control that, the best we can hope for is to hone that discipline and to creatively leverage the right moment and the appropriate time.

Figure out what season it is.

Are you inhaling, exhaling or pausing?

4. LET YOUR WHY DRIVE.

What you're creating isn't as important as *why* you're creating it.

That's what drives prolificacy.

And the secret is, once you identify the running imperative that drives your creative behavior, the nobility behind your work and the posture with which you approach your art, the *what* will make a habit of present itself.

When I started preproduction on my first documentary, my videographer asked about my vision for the film. Having never worked in that medium before, I decided to let my why drive the process. And so, I wrote my creative vision for the movie, not only as a personal exercise, but also as a directorial rubric for the team's behaviors at all phases of the creative process.

Here's what I wrote:

Here's what am I trying to do with this movie.

I have a bunch of songs and stories and sermons and scenes. They're all meaningful to me and I want to share them with the world through the medium of a movie. I don't know what it is, I don't care what it is. All I know is why I want it to exist, and that's because I'm a person who expresses and communicates and shares his feelings and ideas in a prolific way with the world. And since I've never tried doing so through this particular medium, I'm taking initiative and finding a new way to do what I do.

I have a passion to mass communicate, to beguile people with words and images and ideas and stories and music that transfix and compel, and I want to use every possible form of media to circulate my views, extend my sentiments and make my thoughts and feelings and expressions accessible to as many people as possible. Even if that means inventing new methods of communicating.

I don't care about making money or making a name for myself, I don't care about being right or good or accurate, I just want to have this visual archive of these things that are important to me.

That was my why.

And over the course of the project, in those moments when I was feeling overwhelmed or tired or sick or not in the mood to do any kind of creating, I read that email to remind myself why I do what I do. Sometimes I even read it aloud.

Because the reality is, nobody has time for anything anymore. That's the first secret to time management. *Assuming there's never a good time to do anything.* Meaning, it's not about finding time, it's not even about making time; it's about *stealing* it. Grabbing tiny moments from the crowded day and making a meal out of them.

And so, if there's an activity you need to discipline yourself to do, whether it's writing or painting or coding or whatever other creative obligations your life demands of us, it's not really a question of making the time to do it. The secret is creating a rich context of meaning around the activity so it becomes existentially painful not to do it.

You have to trick your own brain.

Take exercise, for example. Dragging your butt out of bed to go to the gym is no easy task. But it becomes significantly easier when you change your understanding of what the gym means to you.

If you reframed the gym as more than just a smelly room to sweat and pump iron, but a center of belonging and a neighborhood community where you connect with people who have overlapping value systems, you might be more likely go. If you reframed the gym as a place where you work out your emotions, purge your stress and return to center, as the necessary training to handle the demands of life, you might be more likely to go.

This reframing won't create any more time in your day to do something, but considering the depth of meaning you now associate with the gym, why would you ever want to miss another day?

The point is, what you're creating isn't as important as *why* you're creating it.

In this book, being prolific isn't the goal. It's the personalized system of practices and routines and disciplines and commitments that enable you to achieve your goal.

That's our why:

Being prolific isn't just about spawning, it's about stretching. Stepping outside of what's comfortable, constantly creating something new, living larger than your labels, that's

how you grow as a person. Because if you never make anything, you never find out who you are.

Being prolific isn't just about executing, it's about elevating. Running up the score on your resume doesn't matter if you're not getting better, smarter, stronger and sharper with every new thing you create. Because if the work never improves, you're just running in place.

Being prolific isn't just about purging, it's about providing. When you die, plan to leave behind a body of work, not just a body. Until then, each artistic milestone you pass is another piece of your legacy. Because if you do it right, it will live forever.

Being prolific isn't just about content, it's about commitment. The guts to stay in the game, show up every day and ship no matter what, will earn respect for the work and, more importantly, for the backbone behind it. Because if you lack continuity, the content won't matter.

Being prolific isn't just about money, it's about mandate. Most artists do what they do because they're ugly when they don't. It's central to who they are. It's their spiritual imperative to make art. Because if they don't create, they don't feel alive.

Being prolific isn't just about entertainment, it's about expression. The purpose of art isn't just to please people, it's to project ideas and feelings. To share a sense of life and an index of human values. Because with only a few pieces of work, you can't express the whole picture.

As a creator, as you continue to ship more and more great work, never forget that giving birth to your creative brainchildren is only the beginning.

It's not about being prolific, it's about what prolificacy enables you to do.

Let your why drive.

5. CARVE A PATH BACK TO YOURSELF.

Every once in a while, life takes me out of myself.

After a certain amount of time and speed and space and pressure, I start to lose touch with my identity. I get stuck in a system of other people's expectations and agendas that puts me at odds with myself. And all of the sudden I realize, *oh crap, if I don't find a way to get back to normal, to exist in a manner that makes sense to me, I'm going to freak out.*

And it's not just me, either.

I once read an interview about Jerry Seinfeld's writing process. He said that if he can't tinker, he grows anxious. That if he can't create and arrange his ideas around the world's messy confusions and trivial irritants, life isn't fun for him.

This experience of existential distress touches us all. These mini identity crises are more common than we realize. We all have those boundary moments when our motivation for doing something is, quite simply, just to feel normal again. Even if only for a short while. And if that means going for a run at dawn when it's dark and there's nobody in the world but you and the stars, so be it.

I'm reminded of what Plato famously asked in *The Republic*:

"Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?"

Who will guard the guards?

What's interesting is, we all have our own version of this question. And for leaders and creators and communicators, the one that weighs us down is usually, *how do I stay inspired when my job is to inspire others?*

You recalibrate the soul. You carve a path back to yourself. You create systems to summon those innovation juices when you need them most.

Because fresh ideas demand fresh fuel.

Fortunately, there are unlimited techniques and practices and rituals for doing so. The experience of inspiring and reinspiring yourself is based on each of your unique preferences and passions and predispositions.

I'd like to share a few of my own, in the hopes that they might inspire yours:

Find and pull your triggers for joy. Once upon a time, I used read books just to read books. But when I became an author, reading turned into work. If a book was open, I wasn't just reading the words, I was trying to deconstruct the architecture and opportunities around them. So I decided to start reading fiction before bedtime. Mostly dystopian epics and gothic thrillers with female protagonists. And what I found was, these books transported me to another place where I didn't have to work. I could just relax and let the words wash over me. By doing so daily, it created a space where I don't feel obligated to do anything other than just soak it all in. And it began to light up a part of my brain that I didn't normally stimulate. *Do you have a personal haven that gives you sustenance from the act itself and puts you back together?*

Find a filter to process your experiences. My yoga practice isn't just a great physical workout, it's also routine of confronting and working through my emotions. And maybe it's because the room is a hundred degrees. Maybe it's because I'm half naked. Maybe it's because I'm staring at myself in the mirror for ninety minutes and I have no choice but to work through my own shit. But after a few postures, any feelings and emotions and inner struggles that need to be dealt with, are. *Do you have a familiar place you go when you're feeling scared or anxious or confused or overwhelmed and need to make sense of the world?*

Find a way to burn calories instead of being sad. I've had my bouts with anxiety, stress, unhappiness and disappointment. Even a few bonafide panic attacks. But the interesting thing is, every time I get busy burning calories, working hard, moving my body, fixing things around the house, spending time with friends and working on the project of building a life, I notice that I no longer have time to be depressed. Because when we start making meaning instead of monitoring moods, life gets a lot less depressing and lot more inspiring. *Do you have a highly human experience, free of the existential torrents of life, which gives you cognitive richness and psychic nourishment?*

Find a way to cocreate. Historically, I've always worked alone. Mainly because it's faster, cheaper and I'm a total control freak who doesn't play well with others. But after about fifteen years, it gets hard to be creative alone. Like playing basketball without a backboard. And so recently, I started collaborating on a creative project with another artist. Turns out, the regularity of human bonding diversifies your creative reservoir in new and exciting ways that sitting alone in a living room never could. When you reach out and cocreate with someone, you're expanding your brain's repertoire and getting new wiring out of it. That's the beauty of collaborative work. It doesn't help you find your voice, it helps you lose it. Because whatever you do together makes the work

different. *Do you know how to discover your own kind and connect with kindred spirits through a shared culture?*

Find a sanctuary of aliveness. A photographer friend of mine once told me that camera is only a tool, what's important are your eyes and what you see in your head. Ever since he said that, photography has become a key meaning investment for me. The process of spotting life's ephemeral moments, sneaking up from behind without a sound, closing my palms around them like lightning bugs and releasing them back into the world, brings me mountains of joy. Whenever I feel the well of inspiration running dry, I take a break from work to go out on a neighborhood photo hunt. *Do you have a sacred practice in a space of beauty that brings some measure of coherence back to your life?*

Find an existential anchor. For the first ten years of my career, meditation was my daily ritual for maintaining calmness and sanity, managing anxiety and motivating creativity. The practice was a combination of deep breathing, self-hypnosis, guided imagery and progressive muscle relaxation. And I either meditated by myself, or went under through guidance of an audio program my therapist customized. But the interesting thing was, meditation never gave me more ideas. It did, however, make the container bigger. Which made it easier to catch the big fish when they swam by. *Do you have a portable, purposeful and private sanctuary that brings you back to center to reconnect with the self, the body, the spirit and the heart?*

Find a way to reconnect to your original joy. I made a name for myself writing books. Ask most of the people who know me, and that's what they know me for. But music was always my first love. My original healer. My earliest container for mystery and meaning. Since the age of twelve, writing songs was how I metabolized my life. It was the closest thing to god I ever had. The problem is, once I started writing books for a living, I became so busy with the *profession* of writing that I lost contact with the *passion* of writing. At the peak of my career, I was only composing a few songs a year. Not exactly prolific. Eventually, I reached a point where I had built up too large of a debt to my artist. And I knew if I didn't find a way to reconnect to the original joy that made me a musician in the first place, I was going to regret it. Since then, I vowed never to lose touch with something I loved so much ever again. *Do you have a way to keep kindling handy, to keep up your original enthusiasm and relive the impulse that initially fueled your artistic energy reserve?*

Find a mini sabbatical. The word sabbatical comes from the term *sabbath*, meaning day of rest. But the idea of a sabbatical dates back to ancient agriculture. Mosaic law decreed that on the seventh year, a farmer's land was to remain untilled while debtors and slaves were to be released. When I first learned about that etymology, it occurred to me that a sabbatical was exactly what I needed. To leave the land alone. To emancipate

myself as a slave to achievement. Now, for someone who's genetically wired for hard work, the hardest thing to do is nothing. It's the opposite of ambition and the antithesis of labor. It's idleness. *Blech*. But as my dad used to say, you have to learn to love what's good for you. And so, last summer, I decided to do nothing. For three straight months. And it turns out, for someone who's happiest when he's productive and prolific, for someone who's wired to find satisfaction by adding value through toil, taking a sabbatical was the best thing I could have done. By the time summer was over, I was completely rejuvenated. *Do you have the ability to leave the creative land alone by creating mini sabbaticals from your artistic land alone?*

Inspired yet?

If not, your challenge as a leader and a communicator and a creator is to consider what it will take to recalibrate your soul and carve a path back to yourself.

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? You will.

6. COMMITMENT IS THE CONSTRAINT THAT SETS YOU FREE.

In one of my favorite books, *The Art of Looking Sideways*, famed visual designer Alan Fletcher wrote that the first move in any creative process is to introduce constraints.

He was referring to *tangible* constraints like lines and borders and shapes and colors and physical space and time, but also *strategic* constraints like job titles and project management and market specialization and finding target customers for your work.

And yet, there's a larger, more theoretical constraint that most creators don't think about.

Commitment.

That's the ultimate constraint. Deciding that you're going to show up every day and create, no matter what. Treating your work as a daily practice, professionalizing your art and using daily momentum to keep yourself from feeling detached from the process.

Kind of like doing yoga.

Both require patience, discipline, flexibility, focus and vulnerability. Both can be done individually or with a group. And both achieve the most meaningful results when you're wearing as little clothing as possible.

But as a daily practitioner of both, I find the strongest parallel between creating and yoga is that it's actually easier to do the posture than it is to sit out.

Because no matter how tired and sore and sweaty and frustrated I am, if I sit out for a minute and squat on the floor, chug water and stare at myself in the mirror, that only magnifies the pain. And I end up just sitting there, feeling sorry for myself, with nothing to focus on except my own suffering, while time ticks by like a winded toy.

And that's when I say to myself, *look, I didn't come to class to not practice, so I may as well stand up and try again.*

In the creative process, it's the same thing.

It's actually easier to write than it is to not write.

No matter how lonely an uninspired and disillusioned and angry I am, when I resort to artfully creating constant distractions instead of working, jacking myself off on social media and pathetically waiting for that one email that changes everything, that only magnifies the pain. And again, I end up just sitting there, feeling sorry for myself, with nothing to focus on except my own suffering, while time ticks by like a winded toy.

And that's when I say to myself, look, I didn't come to the page not to write, so I may as well bear down and try again.

The point is, committing to the work may be hard.

But it's a hell of a lot better than the alternative.

Now, since limited scientific research has been published on the psychology of personal commitment, experiential research will have to suffice.

William Hutchison Murray was a mountaineer and writer. He led a four-month, five hundred-mile trek through the Himalayas that helped blaze the trail for the conquest of Everest three years later. This man understood commitment. And although his powerful philosophy on the subject has been widely cited and attributed to Goethe, the entire passage actually originates from Murray's book *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition*:

"We had definitely committed ourselves and were halfway out of our ruts. We had put down our passage money and booked a sailing expedition to Bombay. This may sound too simple, but is great in consequence. Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative and creation, there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans. That the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way."

Climbing. Yoga. Painting. Same thing.

Ask any professional creator, there's a mysterious dimension to mundane work ethic. Commitment creates a gravitational field that draws good things into it. Commitment, then, as a restraint, is actually what sets you free.

In multiple ways:

Commitment is freedom from quality. When you've committed to doing something everyday, there's no stress about being perfect or right or even good. Because you're just going to be back tomorrow. Today, it's about focusing on quantity and continuity, trusting that everything else will take care of itself.

Commitment is freedom from choice. When you've committed to doing something everyday, there's no wasting brain cells trying to figure out what to do. Because you've already made your own decision and met your own standards. You just keep your eye on the ball and let your mind go. Meanwhile, this positive addiction creates extremely optimal conditions for the brain to grow. Today, it's about getting on with your life and getting to work.

Commitment is freedom from results. When you've committed to doing something everyday, there's no finish line in sight. Because you're not playing to win, you're playing to keep the game going. Today, it's about the journey, not the destination, which allows you to be fully present with the activity at hand.

Commitment is freedom from inhibition. When you've committed to doing something everyday, there's no limitations on taking shots and missing. Because you're just going zero out your board when you play tomorrow anyway. Today, it's about suiting up, hitting your balls out hitting it with all you've got.

Commitment is freedom from pressure. When you've committed to doing something everyday, there's no need to put all your eggs in one basket. Because you're distributing your effort into small, consistent, doable increments. Today, it's about the daily practice, not the big game at the end of the season.

Commitment is freedom from focus. When you've committed to doing something everyday, the daily measure of time and consistency builds compounding interest. Because you've established a gentle flow that obfuscates procrastination. Today, it's about cadence and rhythm and momentum.

It's the only constraint that matters.

Start with commitment, and let everything else fall in line.

II. FUEL

7. SUSTAINING ORIGINALITY OF VOICE

People say there's nothing new under the sun.

But considering the sun is eight hundred and sixty four thousand miles in diameter, if you can't find something new under it, you're not very creative.

Again, your greatest currency in this world is your originality.

Now, to be fair, sustaining originality of voice is no easy task. Especially over the long haul of a career. In fact, even some of the world's most successful creators struggle with this issue.

In a recent interview with *Rolling Stone*, John Mayer admitted that the songwriters who really blew him away were the musicians like Jack Johnson, those who refused to be anybody else other than themselves. He said that *those* were the people who were winning through the years, and that if he had to do it over again, that's exactly how he would have gone about it.

The question is, in a world where the major scale has only seven notes, what, *exactly*, are these musicians doing that's so innovative and interesting and different? And how do they stay so original for so long?

For starters, the notes are only the beginning. Even if you're not a musician. Whatever your medium is, the process of collecting, crafting and communicating your ideas isn't just about content, it's also about *context*. Like my statistics professor used to joke, it's not what the data says, it's what the data points to.

And so, our job as prolific creators and communicators isn't just to pick up ideas, but to pull them apart and point out how they represent a beautiful reminder of what could be. Not just to take pictures of interesting moments or found objects, but to ponder those experiences and wonder if they point to a more general principle. Not just to identify solutions, but to differentiate through our diagnosis of the problem. And not just to observe things, but to choreograph people's attention to the thing behind the thing.

One method for doing so is through *hyperfocused expression*. Finding the small part of the world that you can touch and setting it free.

I'll never forget when *The New York Times* wrote a fascinating profile piece about Jerry Seinfeld. When they spoke about his unequaled analytical gifts, the reporter claimed that the billionaire comedian could describe a bouncing ball in a way that could change the way people looked at bouncing balls forever. He a master of arranging life's messy confusions, shrewdly and immaculately, into a bouquet of trivial irritants.

Who knew that nothing could be the inspiration for everything?

For me, it's my nametag.

Wearing one all day, everyday for the past fourteen years has been my passport to interestingness, my mechanism for making sense of my existence and the source against which I bounce everything I see. And as long as I'm wearing it and people are engaging around it, the nametag services as an endless source of material, a contextual reservoir that will never run dry.

And yet, nobody cares about nametags.

But I do. Probably more than anyone on the planet. In fact, caring is an understatement. Nametags are an obsession. A religion. An addiction. A pathological psychosis.

At least that's what my therapist says.

But if you're not sure what the source of your hyperfocused expression is, consider trying the following exercise:

Everything I need to know, I learned from my _____

Whatever little world *you* investigate to a great, high level, is a surefire path to prolificacy. Don't be afraid to mine that vein. People become successful because there's something about this world that fascinates them and ignites them and they've spent years scratching that itch.

What's interesting is, the word "context" derives from the term *contextus*, which literally means, "to weave together." That's where originality and prolificacy are born. Whatever you're creating, always take time to look for original facets and angles and refractions of light that create a context adjacent to the content.

And you'll find there are plenty of new ideas under the sun.

8. DEVELOP A REPERTOIRE OF FAITHFUL FORCES.

The *flow* of creativity is the constant.

The *feelings* of the creator are the variable.

And if you seek to consistently generate compelling messages and work on a prolific scale as a communicator, you need better constants. Muscles to count on, places to return to, rituals to abide by, people to confide in, rocks to anchor to, practices to rely on, structures to lean against, these routines become the repertoire of faithful forces to keep your creative life stable and fruitful when circumstances get a little too overwhelming.

I prefer vomiting.

That's the term I use for the gasket where you purge everything that happens to you. A daily ritual of emotional release where you metabolize your experiences, make serious mental headway into your ideas and get the creative faucet flowing. A space without circumference, a private container of safety where judgment can't enter and a free venue where ideas can run free without the scrutiny of readers, critics, editors and yourself.

Julia Cameron, author of the bestselling series *The Artist's Way*, pioneered this journaling exercise twenty years ago. She called it morning pages. Here's how it works:

First thing in the morning, even before checking email, open a blank document, either on paper or on your computer. Spew out every single thought and feeling and idea that's running through your mind. Dreams, worries, fears, annoyances, ideas, what you did the day before, everything. Keep writing until you've filled up three pages. And when you're done, feel free to save or delete the document, and then get on with your day.

Try it for a week, and you'll quickly find that that vomiting is one of the constants you won't be able to live without. And, there's no *one right way* to do it. What matters is that you understand the science behind it as a constant. What matters is that you trust the process as a gateway to prolificacy.

Cameron's field research on morning pages is extensive and clinically proven. In each of the books in her series on creativity, she shares case studies, insights and breakthroughs from readers around the world who committed to this daily ritual and saw real results. And since I've devoured every book she's ever written, I've taken the liberty of creating a summary of the science behind the morning pages vomiting ritual:

First, here's what they are.

They are time outs. They are portable solitude. They are rituals of reflection. They are a form of meditation. They help you listen to yourself. They are the first check in of the day. They are the basic tools of creative unblocking. They are psychological holding environments. They are gateways to inner and higher selves. They are gripe sessions where you work out your grudges. They are moments of free association and celebration.

They are catcher's mitts for many small ideas that lead to larger breakthroughs.

Second, here's what they do:

Lend you stability. Prioritize your day. Keep you grounded. Give you a place to ventilate.

Give you the privacy you crave. Help you take accurate stock of your life. Provide a place to examine the many aspects of an experience. Reframe our failures into lessons learned. Galvanize your days and make you acutely attuned to your personal feelings.

Give us immediate access to creative energy, point us in the direction of our growth and make us intimate with ourselves, which allows us to be more authentically intimate with others.

Thirdly, here's why they work:

You awaken your intuition. You must train your censor to stand aside. You get current, catch up on yourself and pinpoint precisely what you are feeling and thinking. You tap into a creative energy that flows like a subterranean river through your life. You can find out what you like and don't like. You can report precisely and just let yourself write. You get down on the page whatever it is you are. You keep your spirit from being parched and dry. You can miniaturize irrational worries and underscore your legitimate concerns in a sorting process. You draw to your attention those areas of your life that need your focus. You discover that a little trickle of writing keeps the flow from closing down completely.

Lastly, here's why they matter:

Morning pages are a perfect way to create off the record. There's just something beautiful and healthy about those never before never again moments when we give ourselves permission to create freely. To make things without the burden of evidence. It's a helpful way to keep our creative practice balanced. Since the impulse to make

things on the record is a primary characteristic of human beings, it's liberating as hell to fight it every once in a while. Morning pages, then, give us the freedom to follow our most impractical curiosities. Because art doesn't have to hang in a museum every time.

Who knew vomiting could be so useful?

And that's just one example. We'll identify more rituals as we continue on. For now, the goal is to be accumulating a diverse collection of constants to your repertoire of faithful forces.

9. ACTIVATE THE CREATIVE SUBROUTINE IN YOUR HEAD.

Every creator needs an on ramp.

A ritual that prompts a work mindset, a moment that merges you into the creative process, an environment that sets a tone that says *work happens here*, a practice that ensures cadence and rhythm, and a routine that gets you in the mood, in the flow and in the zone, so that by the time you actually hit the highway of life, you're traveling at the same speed as traffic, and you can navigate the road effectively.

It's actually quite scientific.

The brain takes cues from the body.

Whatever on ramp behavior we practice, it activates the creative subroutine in our head, brings up our energy and snaps us into the appropriate state of mind to do our work.

That's why so many artists start every day of their lives in exactly same way. Because they don't want to have to wake up and look for options of what to do first. That's a decision-making process that's exhaustive and stressful and wastes valuable energy they should be dedicating to making things.

That's why I spend the first half hour of every day inhaling. *Promiscuously.*

I read and browse and learn from a diverse range of websites, blogs, pictures, comic strips, trending memes, online publications, interviews, research studies, books, articles, songs, street art, store signs, podcasts, eavesdroppings, conversations and other sources of inspiration.

Plus, I take notes. Lots of notes. And by the time I'm done making my rounds, my desktop is littered with new documents and ideas and perspective and insight. I feel engaged with what's going on in the world. I view the news as a source of energy, not just a source of information.

And now I'm ready to go to work.

This morning practice, this creative subroutine, ensures that the first part of my day has a cadence and rhythm that includes movement. By giving my ritual of thinking the primacy it deserves, never forcing it to compete for my attention with anything else, I find that I'm able to stay prolific.

Most daily routines work this way. The discipline becomes a finely calibrated mechanism for taking advantage of a range of limited resources, be it time, space, money or relationships. It becomes the key that unlocks the door to creativity.

Francis Spufford, author of the book *Unapologetic*, found the same to be true in the church world. Her thesis was that religion, irrational as it may be, could still make surprising emotional sense to people. In her research, she found that reciting the same prayers again and again, pacing her body again and again through the set movements of faith, somehow kept the door ajar through which the divine could enter. Repetition, she said, was not the enemy of spontaneity, but maybe even its enabler. And by holding onto the deep grooves of holy habit, carved into her life over and over by repetition, whenever she sat down, whatever she needed would be there.

Creativity works the exact same way.

It's not being in the light, it's being there before it arrives.

All you have to do is activate the creative subroutine in your head.

What daily ritual will be your on ramp?

10. HELP INSPIRATION SEEK YOU OUT.

Being prolific means having an awareness plan.

A metacognitive procedure or mental recipe for perceiving and thinking about the environment around you. A lens for interacting with the world. A plugin for the human operating system.

For example:

What if you saw everything as edible? What if you dreamed up alternative interpretations for the events you noticed? What if you hypothesized people's potential relationships with each other? What if you imagined past and future reincarnations of every object you encountered?

Those are awareness plans.

Psychologist Herbet Leff coined the term in *Playful Perception*, a quietly published book from the early eighties. But despite its relative obscurity, a number of renowned academic publications dubbed his work as groundbreaking research in the field of cognitive science. In fact, since its original publication date, dozens of bestselling books on innovation and psychology have touted its validity, citing his book as a definitive work on the topic.

This book completely changed the way I approach my creative process. The simple idea of choosing an awareness plan helped me realize that with the right lens, the right posture and the right filter, *inspiration can actually seek you out*.

Take analogous thinking, for example. Douglas Hofstadter, a professor of cognitive science, says that analogy, is the fuel and fire of thinking, the bread and butter of our daily mental lives. And I agree. The process of transferring ideas from one field of knowledge into another is an awareness plan that can change everything.

I remember when my teachers used to assign quizzes like this:

FORMULA : LABORATORY ::

- 1. map : wall**
- 2. relaxation : den**
- 3. sunlight : patio**
- 4. recipe : kitchen**

The strategy is to ask the question, “What else is like this? How can I apply the basic concept in front of me some other domain of life?”

The answer is “d”, in case you were wondering.

And that’s just one example. Awareness plans come in all shapes and sizes. Analogies simply work to help inspiration seek me out.

Let’s say you decide to start writing a blog. Like it not, you’ve just installed a new awareness plan. Because the metacognition of thinking about what you’re going to say, looking for interesting things to blog about, that’s a posture change. That’s a different way of experiencing the world. And it’s amazing how quickly inspiration seeks you out when your blog paints you into that corner of having to post something once or twice or five times a week.

As a daily blogger for more than a decade, blogging taught me to do justice to the things I notice. The day I started blogging, I also started walking around like I was holding puzzle pieces. I became hypersensitive to the world around me. And I approached every encounter as grist for the mill. This delicate sense, this posture of incurable curiosity, allowed even the tiniest experiences to inspire me. And it’s kept the queue filled with things to blog about every since. One million words and counting.

Or what about photography?

A camera, after all, is only a tool. What’s important are your eyes and what you see in your head. That’s another awareness plan.

Instagram, for example, is literally and figuratively a filter through which to experience your world. That’s why I find photography so fascinating. The simple fact that I have a camera in my pocket forces me to notice those serendipitous ephemeral moments and capture them with my camera. Like the scrap of paper I found on the ground that was in the shape of a dog, which turned out to be a receipt from a pet store. Tell me that’s not inspiring.

And so, photography is this beautiful process, this awareness plan, I’ve come to love. Not unlike inhaling sentences to document into my creative inventory, scouring for visual moments that also become one of my favorite ways to stay engaged and present with the world.

I’m reminded of George Carlin, who was once asked how young writers could stay prolific over the long arc of their careers. His advice was, as long as you have

observations to make, as long as you can see things and let them register against your template, and as long as you're able to take impressions and compare them with the old ones, you will always have material. You can't run out of ideas as long as you keep getting new information and you can keep processing it.

And so, what creativity requires is a continuity of concern, an intense awareness of one's active inner life, a sensitivity to the external world, and an unbearable frustration to express the combination of the two in some creative way.

Once you find the awareness plans that work for you, whether they involve technology or just a way of comparing and contrasting your experiences, they become a precursor for prolificacy. You create a framework for inspiration to stimulate insight and curiosity, improve cognitive readiness and psychological openness, influence your feelings and views of the world, free yourself from the bonds of traditional perceptual sets and begin to treat things in life in a constructive and enlightened fashion.

By training your brain to be on the lookout for anything in any interaction that has potential, creative blocks will become quaint relics of the past.

11. CREATE A UNIQUE, UNREPLICATABLE INSPIRATION POOL.

Our greatest currency in this world is our originality.

And yet, it's also our greatest burden.

Because the interminable pressure to create and produce and constantly crank out new material, day after day, without being derivative or repetitive or stale, can overwhelm even the most prolific creator.

Bill Watterson, famed creator of *Calvin & Hobbes*, delivered a commencement speech many years ago to a small college in Ohio. He told the students that if you ever want to find out just how uninteresting you really are, get a job where the quality and frequency of your thoughts determine your livelihood.

That's why we need a system. A framework for inspiration.

We've already explored the *metacognitive* level, through the power of awareness plans as a plugin for the human operating system. We've already examined the *ritualistic* level, by identifying a repertoire of faithful forces to keep the creative life constant. The next step is to consider the *recreational* level, by creating a unique inspiration pool that nobody can replicate. To be able to find inspiration where no one else is looking.

Tom Waits has a few things to say about this.

In my opinion, he is the most original songwriter of his generation. For more than thirty years, he's won over millions of fans around the world with distinctive and mysterious songs that he refers to as, "Halloween music, murder ballads, field hollers, cautionary tales and parlor jingles."

In a famous interview about his creative process, Tom told the story about an oil stain he once saw on the drapes of his childhood home. He described it as a wink from somebody who was living inside drapes, and how that experience activated his imagination, letting him know that there was life on the other side of the veil.

"I've been looking at stains ever since I was seven, waiting for a message."

Tom also talked about his habit of turning on two radios at once, because he liked hearing things wrong. He would also take a tape recorder, put it in the trashcan with wheels, turn it on, roll around in the yard with it, and then play it back and see if he could hear any interesting rhythms.

Strange guy, huh?

And yet, he was recently inducted into the rock and roll hall of fame.

The only place where cover bands aren't allowed.

Proving, that sustained artistic originality is possible. Even if we're not as eccentric and talented and successful as Tom may be, the flow of ideas doesn't have to stop. We simply need to view our eclectic pursuits as rich areas to mine.

I remember when I first started practicing yoga.

Within weeks of taking my first class, dozens of new ideas, thoughts, language, metaphors, examples, inspirations, influences and textures, that I never would have come across elsewhere, started pouring out me. Which is interesting, considering how much sweat literally pours out of my body during class.

But once yoga became a staple in my recreational life, the level of originality in my writing skyrocketed to new levels. It's like someone unlocked a valve, I took trip to another land and my feet have never returned to the ground.

You truly can't spell recreation without creation. It's not enough to write things worth talking about, we have to live things worth writing about.

Keller Williams is another prime example. I've heard him note on a number of occasions that he's a *fan* first, a *musician* second, a *songwriter* third and a *lyricist* fourth. No wonder he's so successful. He's got his artistic priorities in order. And that gives him a unique, unreplicable inspiration pool.

It's a tricky balance to strike. We get so obsessed with the *creation* of art that we lose touch with the *appreciation* of it. Like when I meet writers who can't tell me a single book they're currently reading and it makes me want to paper cut their faces into jelly.

The point is, we have to know what great art feels like. We have to make time to still be a fan of things. We have to refill the inspiration reservoir. Otherwise we'll be running on fumes, creating from a skimpy matrix, bouncing our perspective off a thin wall, working repetitively from our own narratives.

Life, as a reminder, is subordinate to our art, not the other way around. Our first responsibility as creators is to be human beings, to be real people, with unique inspiration pools that nobody can replicate. We have to have a life to write about, since four walls and a computer screen can get pretty stale.

The adventurous part is, the whole world is your rhetorical toolbox.

There's a fascinating book called *The Demon and the Angel*, written by award winning poet and critic, Edward Hirsch. It explores the creative process by recounting and analyzing the mysterious forces that inspired famous creators in history, from poets to authors to musicians to painters.

In the final chapter of the book, the author concludes with an eloquent and inspiring vision of how different artists respond to the power and demonic energy of the creative impulse:

“Inspiration is burning on the rooftops, moving through secret passageways and windy staircases, through corridors of light, precarious thrones, scarlet mountain ranges. It is carved in stone in crumbling apartment buildings, country churches, abandoned cemeteries, gathering its strength in railroad yards at sunset that are tinged with immaterial reds, ghostly blues. It flames out like shining from shook foil, like twenty thousand stars purpling at midnight. It flashes its sword in the gate, and troubles your dreams. It is a cry that rises out of human body and announces the constant baptism of newly created things. Listen closely and you may hear a voice that cries from very far down inside you. That voice is trumpeting a liberation.”

Everything goes into the hopper and enables you. Everything around you is a point of connection with crossover usefulness. Everything is just one ingredient in a big, boiling pile of inputs. Everything is lying around waiting to be discovered, camouflaged against the patterns of everyday life, waiting for you to detect them. And if you're entirely open and vulnerable to every shred of stimuli that crosses your path, you can use those things to your advantage.

Like songwriter Jolie Holland once said, “It's like you walk around eating poetry and then you throw up a song at the end.”

Because wherever you look, there's something to see. Your mind trains itself to have a very sensitive radar, which tees up a part of your awareness to be more focused on potential value. And by acting as if there might be value, suddenly, it feels like the world has arranged itself for your work. This allows ideas to just fall out of you, since you now have the frame.

If we can learn to create from there, from that place of humanity, the pressure of sustaining artistic originality won't be the burden it used to be.

12. LISTEN TO WHAT WANTS TO BE WRITTEN.

Creativity is the ultimate form of active listening.

Paul Weinfeld wrote a great article in *American Songwriter* about this very topic.

“The world doesn’t need more songs, but it does need people willing to train their minds to receive the difficult and unique thing in them that wants to be born. Your job is to be a perfect receiver of what’s speaking through you. Because at the moment when a musician actually hears the song he’s been waiting for, nothing in the world could be more alive.”

That’s how people become prolific. They tune into the muse and the situation and the gleams of light that flash across their minds, trusting what the world is trying to tell them. Starting on even the smallest of approximations and preparing to travel the wider vistas they open. It’s like cosmic fishing. You feel a nibble and then you go hook the fish.

I once heard another musician say that if a song keeps coming back to you, you should always give it a second chance at being heard. That if the melody or rhythm or lyric continues to stalk you in the moment, you have a responsibility to leave whatever you’re doing and go home or sit in the car and work on it.

He’s so right.

When a new idea shows up and refuses to go away, there’s a certain amount of artistic obedience that’s in order. We can’t just show appreciation, we have to take action. We have to write something down, draw something up or build something out. Whatever it takes to help the word become flesh.

Neuroscientist Sam Harris calls them **zombie ideas**. Those things that, no matter how many times you kill them, they just come shambling back at you.

Our job is to listen to them. To listen what wants to be written. Not to run. Not to shoot them in the head. Not to locate patient zero. Not to find the antidote for the original zombie strain. And not to seek out the one guy left on the planet who has a natural immunity to the virus.

To listen.

That's what I tell people who complain that they're creatively blocked and struggling to find inspiration for their ideas. *You should have your hearing checked.* Because you get exactly what you're willing to receive. The people who transform themselves into relentlessly open containers into which the world can place its ideas, rarely run short on inspiration.

Now, earlier, I talked about using meditation as an existential anchor to recalibrate the soul and make the container bigger. And I explored morning pages as a tool for getting in touch with the deeper currents of yourself. Another related strategy for creative active listening is physical movement. Reconnecting with your body.

Solvitas perambulator, as Jefferson dubbed it. Did you know the founding father was famous for taking two hour walks every day? He believed the sovereign invigorator of the body was exercise, and a strong body makes a strong mind.

But there's actually some science behind it, too.

Exercise clears your mind, stabilizes your emotions and levels your perspective. The rhythmic, repetitive action transfers the locus of your brain energy. It contributes to an increased production and release of endorphins. And this results in a sense of euphoria, popularly labeled as the *runner's high* or *flow state*. What's more, pumping rhythmically and repetitively also pumps the well of your creativity. That's why walking, swimming, running and cycling are such effective venues for active listening. When your physical body is engaged in something, your subconscious gets some playtime.

Hell, I've written entire books in my head on eight mile runs.

Because the brain takes cues from the body.

Scott Adams, creator of Dilbert, wrote a telling article about the relationship between his physical body and his creative body of work. He said his process feels like a stream of ideas rushing through his mind, pausing only long enough for a reflexive evaluation. And that the only ideas that make it out of the stream and into his more rational mind are the ones that move him physically, meaning, some sort of body reaction that can range from a giggle to goose bumps. And so, if he doesn't *feel* the idea, he flushes it. But if he feels the idea with his body, he lets it stick around long enough to apply his rational filter.

That's some serious active listening.

If you're looking for inspiration to help build your prolific body of work, start by reconnecting with your physical body itself.

Engage your physicality and listen to what wants to be written.

**PART 2 – THROUGHPUT:
THE CREATIVE SEASON OF
*ORGANIZATION***

I. ACTIVE

13. IF YOU DON'T WRITE IT DOWN, IT NEVER HAPPENED

Tom Clancy was the bomb.

Quite literally. He wasn't just the master of espionage and military science; he also knew a thing or two about being prolific. With seventeen bestsellers and more than one hundred million copies of his books in print, he was one of the most successful thriller authors of all time.

In the novel *Debt of Honor*, the main character finds himself at a high stakes political meeting, attempting to restart the nation's economy after an attack by a formerly friendly nation. Addressing the chief of staff, he says the immortal words:

"If you don't write it down, it never happened."

When I first heard this phrase, it had a profound effect on my creative process. It taught me to relieve my mind of the necessity of remembering. That everything I need must be collected somewhere other than my head. To stop trusting my memory and start managing my creative workflow intelligently. To train myself to become an informational virtuoso who's fast, responsive, proactive, organized, and never lets a single idea get away. And to never encounter inspiration without picking its pocket.

As a result of this training, whenever an idea crosses my path, I am ruthless. My sixth sense will pick up on ideas before they even hit the ground. Even if they show up unsuspected and unforeseen, I will seize them with the devastating swiftness of creative ninja who's so fast and efficient, that by the time his opponent realizes he's just been decapitated; the ninja is already down the street drinking green tea. You'll never see me coming, and you'll never see me leave.

Because if I learned anything from watching ninja movies as a kid, a true mercenary practices the art of invisibility. He leaves without a trace. He burns himself completely. And if you want to hone your ability to process information with that kind of speed, the first step is to relieve yourself of any and all editing duties. To retire your red pen.

This is a serious mental block that thwarts the creative process. We waste time and energy trying to judge if a particular idea is good. And yet, that's not our job. As

creators, our job is to treat everything we encounter with deep democracy, fundamental affirmation and radical acceptance. Never meeting an experience with a tilted head.

Without this posture and way of seeing the world, we become the type of people who think to themselves, well, if I forget something, I didn't need to know it. The silent dialogue in our head says, *that'll never work, that's stupid, I can't use that, that's not logical, I'm not allowed to do that, I should really wait until I have hard data.* And we walk through the world thinking that most great ideas are just waiting to be talked out of.

The problem is, this mindset sends us on an infinite progression of confirmation bias. Evaluating becomes the devil that narrows our thinking. And we begin to favor information that confirms our beliefs, selectively documenting only those ideas that support our existing position of what a good idea is.

Mitch Hedberg used to have a great joke on this:

"Sometimes in the middle of the night, I think of something that's funny, so I go get a pen and I write the idea down. Unless the pen's too far away, and then I have to convince myself my joke wasn't funny in the first place."

A perfect example that before the documentation process even begins, the creator's obligation is to empty himself of any expectations, perceptions, hierarchies and value chains attached to his ideas. Rather than ignoring or evaluating or trying to get rid of the ideas he doesn't like, he breathes them in and writes them down. He allows his work to be enriched by the things he would normally consider to be useless. And no matter how strange that little germ may seem, no matter how much the idea goes against what he intended to create, he honors it by at least hearing it out and finding out what it has to say.

Because you never know where that idea might come in handy.

Plato actually coined a phrase for this very concept. He would proclaim *verbo volant, scripta manent*, which meant that spoken words fly away, but written words remain.

In my office, I have a songwriting station. It's a classroom style rolling whiteboard, chaotically collaged with lyric sheets. Most of the ideas aren't fully formed yet, they're just long typed lists of words and phrases and sentences that I've been collecting from a variety of inspiration sources over the years.

But you'll notice, my material is sorted chronologically from left to right. Meaning, I can visualize lyric ideas from three years ago, three months ago or three days ago, depending on where I stand in relation to the board. And the exciting part about this process is, at any given songwriting moment, I might end up using some old, obscure lyric from three years ago *that I don't even remember writing down*. But it doesn't matter, because that's what wanted to be written at the time. I had no way of knowing that at the moment of conception, but because I wrote down that idea, without expectation or judgment, it eventually found a home three years later.

And so, this approach to collecting ideas has both cognitive and strategic implications. You have to process information quickly, but you also have to manage your creative workflow intelligently. You have to avoid trusting your brain, but you also have avoid editing your instincts.

Because if you don't write it down, it never happened.

14. GET THE IDEA TO GROUND ZERO.

Being prolific isn't just about using your right brain.

It's about using your brain right.

Because if you don't *process* what you write down, you'll never make anything happen. After all, what good is a good idea if you can't find it?

As a textbook right brainer, I've always struggled with this ability. I'm the kind of person who'd rather be swept up by my imagination than bogged down by the details. I'd rather dream in the blue sky than dig through the nuts and bolts.

Carlin always managed to keep me on point, though. He used to say that every artist needs a scientist buddy. A nerdy left brainer who's hard at work in the underground laboratory, indexing and categorizing and processing, while the goofy artist goes out in the world and puts on a show.

Does that kind of dualism ever manifest in your creative life?

Odds are, you probably have to wear both the artist and scientist hats. But tightening up your systems a bit can help you releases new levels of output and expression. And the good news is, logic and order and sequence and systems can be just as sexy as the ideas themselves. You simply need a cool mantra for processing information. Here's mine:

Get the idea to ground zero.

It's a bit dramatic, I know. But the reality is, we live in a time of unprecedented information overload, and it's hurling towards us faster than our constitutions can handle. Our brains require a ton of psychic energy to collect and process these large inventories of ideas; so frankly, I'm just trying to give my head a rest.

David Allen, the grand master of getting things done, says that anything we allow into our psychological world, doesn't belong there. And if things aren't managed into trusted external systems, they take up residence in our psyche. This gives us a false sense of control, allowing us to accept some level of internal responsibility for everything that represents an *open loop*, or, any incomplete situation that we have some investment in.

In short, *the mind is a terrible office.*

The truth is, he says, is that the mind is handicapped in its ability to remember, remind and automatically think and decide. Our brains want new ideas to be moved downstream, processed and entrusted into a concrete system, so they can peacefully return to their natural state. This closing of open loops, this completion of unfinished items, allow previously inaccessible energy and psychic fuel to show up.

Now that's using your brain right

And so, ground zero is the central cockpit of creative control. The entry point into the processing workflow. It's the primary location for offloading raw materials into the factory. Think of it as creating a system for extending your mind. It's where the scientist buddy does his best work.

For you, that could mean your studio, cubicle, drawer, workstation, desktop, laptop, mobile device, sketchbook, whiteboard or a even dedicated wall in your office. All are good options. The thing to remember is, it doesn't matter *what* your ground zero is, only *that* it's the primary filter for everything you inhale.

Because once your ideas land, a good chunk of the mental work is already done. You've noticed something, you've captured it, you've sent it to ground zero, and now you can process it downstream and get to the right brained work making the word flesh.

Recently I was listening to a podcast interview about the unstable financial life of actors. The guest, a successful movie star, was reminiscing about his lean years as a young performer. And he used the phrase *episodic earnings*. That caught my attention. Something about his language clicked with me. I don't know why, but I literally felt those two words in my body, and so I said to myself, *get that idea to ground zero*.

I grabbed my phone, opened up the email app, sent a message to myself with the words *episodic earnings* in the subject line, slid the phone back in my pocket and went back to whatever I was doing. The next morning, I opened that email, copied those two words, deleted that email, opened a blank document, pasted the words *episodic earnings* at the top of the page, saved the document with those two words as the file name, dragged the document to my inventory folder, and then let it drift downstream to be fleshed out at a later date.

The whole thing took less than sixty seconds. The scientist's work was done. And now, from this point forward, whenever the artist is ready to step in and get to work, those two words will be waiting for him, ready to grow into something meaningful.

The lesson is, if you don't process what you write down, you'll never make anything happen. It may sound like a lot of work at first, but once you perfect your personal creative workflow, you'll become more prolific than you ever thought possible. What's more, rituals like this carve a neural pathway. They allow processing to become second nature to you.

I remember reading a popular [interview](#) with Stephen King, who famously said that when it comes to the creative process, to get scientific about it is a little like trying to catch moonbeams in a jar.

Isn't that the truth? That if we don't believe in magic on *some* level, those moments of virtuosity and mystery and meaning, those acts of human moral beauty that provoke the kindred and start a conversation with something much larger than ourselves, our work will suffer.

At the same timer, despite our most romantic inclinations, the creative process just as much clerical as it is magical. It's equal parts sorcery and ditch digging. And in the beginning stages of our work, we have to get the idea to ground zero before infinity intercedes.

As a collector, creator and communicator of ideas, you have to hone your ability to play the roles of both the goofy artist and his scientist buddy.

15. IS EVERYTHING YOU KNOW WRITTEN DOWN SOMEWHERE?

Anyone can be a prolific creator if they have a prodigious memory.

But the question is, does the ability to remember things come as part of our genetic package, or is it a muscle we can train?

Yes and yes. On the hereditary side, certain people are *innately wired* with superior memories and they naturally and habitually recall almost everything in their lives, from images to numbers to dates to human faces to personal experiences. These people are known as jerks.

On the hard working side, certain people are *intentionally working* to build superior memories by understanding how the brain functions, focusing attention, creating associations and giving those associations meaning. These people are known as overachievers.

For the rest of the people in the world who don't have the time, resources or patience to dedicate their lives to boosting their memory power, there are a few simple concepts worth knowing that might make remembering easier.

For example, you've probably heard some variation of the following sentence:

The number of objects an average human can hold in working memory is seven.

Miller famously discovered this fact about the brain back in the fifties in his groundbreaking study on the cognitive significance of the number seven. Since then, his research on the limits of the human capacity for processing information has become one of the most highly cited papers in the history of psychology.

That's why smart people write things down. To capture their thinking before it vaporizes. Because when idea lightning strikes, it's competing with other brain activities, so the documentation process hooks their ideas immediately, firmly and enduringly. They know that if they don't write it down, it never happened.

And, there's more.

Boosting memory, often times, is a simple matter of making room. Prolific people don't just write things down because they might have a good idea in this moment, but also because they might have good ideas in future moments, and their brain needs to be in the best possible position to receive them. It's more than just a security measure; it's a sovereignty measure. Capturing your thinking relieves your brain of the necessity of remembering, frees up your working memory and opens your mind to receive new ideas.

My mentor is a prolific creator who runs a multimillion dollar sales training company. The reason he's the best in the world is, everything he knows is written down somewhere. I've shadowed him at his office for weeks at a time, and I can assure you, there are zero leaks in his collection process. Which means, he knows his material cold. Which means, he's a master of his subject. Which means, during his sales seminars he doesn't have to think about what he's going to say. Which means, his brain is free to think of innovative ideas for his participants.

By writing everything down, he makes room. His mind lets go of the lower level task of hanging onto everything. By providing fleeting thoughts with an external parking place, he clears the deck, unsticks his workflow and invites a steady stream of ideas and visions to come pouring in.

This process became first came clear to me when I read *The Creativity Book*. Eric Maisel explains that organization can be a real challenge for everyday creative people who have lots of ideas, dreams, goals, responsibilities, and who are perhaps a little suspicious of organization because it might kill their creative edge. Getting organized, after all, is antithetical to spontaneity, intuition and freedom.

And yet, while isn't of life or death importance that you remember everybody's birthday, Maisel says, it is vital that the chaos of ideas that start to flood your brain when you open up to your own creativity have a place to be sorted and stored and saved. If you don't give them that chance, then chaos overwhelms you and no work can get accomplish.

Is everything *you know* written down somewhere?

Because cognitively, it's the smartest move.

I read a fascinating study from the *Nueromarketing Science and Business Association*, which detailed how the physical documentation process affects our brains. Turns out, when we physically write something down, we stimulate a collection of cells in the base of our brain known as the reticular activating system. This becomes the filter

for all the information our brain needs to process and it gives more attention to what we are currently focusing on. And as a result, the physical act of writing things down brings the information to the forefront, triggers our brains to pay close attention, raises the psychological ante and increases our commitment as collectors, creators and communicators of ideas.

And so, whether you have a prodigious memory, whether you're trying to improve it, and whether your collection tools are paper and pen, electronic note taking, audio capturing, emailing, voice recognition technology or some kind of web app, the good news is, you don't have to invest a lot of time and money to boost your memory.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter *how* you write ideas down, only *that* you write them down.

You just have to keep asking yourself the same question.

Is everything you know written down somewhere?

16. NEVER FALL IN LOVE WITH YOUR OWN INVENTORY.

My grandfather has long and prestigious history in the closeout industry.

As a discount retail pioneer, he founded his business in the early seventies. Nearly four decades later, his company remains a global leader.

Naturally, he's seen everything, from depressions to recessions to floods to industry shifts to product recalls to lost palettes to technology innovation to stolen trucks to entire ceilings spontaneously collapsing in warehouses. And something he once told me that I'll always remember was:

"Never fall in love with your own inventory."

That's great advice for wholesalers and artists alike.

Because as creators and crafters and communicators, our primary occupation isn't to discern the value of our ideas, but to keep our inventory of ideas flowing at all times.

And so, we discard our evaluative tendencies. We treat every idea, every experience and every thought with deep democracy. We have to say yes to what is.

A few years ago, my wife and I spent a summer taking improv classes at a local theater company. Our instructors told us, it's not about being the funniest person on stage, constantly inventing punchlines to get a cheap laugh from the audience. It's about saying yes and serving the scene. It's about looking into someone's eyes and feeling their reactions. It's about responding honestly to people's realities. And it's about keeping the ball in play no matter what, fully committing to whatever rabbit hole you go down.

The creative process has a similar model.

One of my favorite books is *Unintentional Music*, a program for using openness and acceptance to get the most out of the creative process. The subject matter of the book mostly revolves around music, but there's still a lot we can glean from a generic creative standpoint. The author writes:

“Focus on the music you do not intend to make. Align yourself with the flow of process. See disturbing or unwanted things as potentially meaningful. Stay open to what you are typically closed to. Rather than judging experiences, just be with what is. When something arises, let it come, and when something disappears, let it go. And learn to love whatever happens and trust that it will lead you to where you ultimately need to go.”

We never fall in love with our own inventory.

The polar opposite of this concept is *premature cognitive commitment*.

As you remember from our discussion on working modular, humans can easily become emotionally or intellectually bound to a course of action, assigning labels to ideas too early in the creative process. And as a result, they talk themselves into the wrong ideas and out of the right ones.

For example, think how many times you’ve said to yourself, or heard someone else say to themselves, “Look, if don’t remember it when I get home, then it couldn’t have been that important.”

Bullshit. You don’t know that. Nobody does.

What you know is that your job is to create. What you know is that you have to trust the process. What you know is that your most valuable and interesting and leverageable ideas will make themselves known when the time is right.

Kevin Smith, writer, filmmaker, podcaster and aforementioned stoner, recently gave a commencement speech at a film school, in which he shared his philosophy on this matter:

“Any seed to imagination, any ignition of pure creation, is not just healthy and safe, but practical and necessary. Because every idea gives us perspective. It humbles our creative spirit. And, bad ideas come in handy for other problems later. Nothing is ever wasted, every idea eventually finds a home. Ultimately our process of experimentation helps create the elbowroom for good ideas to emerge. All we have to do is listen. And sometimes, when you chase whimsy as far as you can, it gets winded and weird enough for you to catch it.”

In the decade I’ve worked as a freelancer, I’ve had thousands of bad ideas. Horrible ones. Bordering on embarrassing. Several of which were executed, poorly. But as my mentor used to say, the best way to have a good idea is to have a hundred bad ones.

Fortunately, out of that slush pile, I've also had thirty or forty really, really good ideas. Ideas that spread, ideas that made money, ideas that made a difference. Because I believe there are no successes or failures, only the consequences of our experiments.

We can never lose that spirit. We owe it to our creative selves to set up a consequence free space for experimentation. A safe place where we can boldly fiddle our way to the truth. One where we never fall in love with our own inventory, but we never discard any of the boxes either.

So for now, just get the idea into the warehouse.

You never know where you might use it.

17. LEARN TO WORK MODULAR.

I once heard a famous comedian reveal that his secret for writing material was, he didn't write jokes, he wrote moments.

That's why he's so prolific. *He works modular.*

In his process, each thought is an uncategorized chunk of creative material. An objective, portable piece content that accumulates and categorizes into its own structure. It's not a bit or a skit or a story or routine, it's just a moment.

This man is onto something. He knows that all ideas bring with them their own individuality. And as creators, we have to respect that. We have to consciously step back from the work and think, who am I to say what this moment might become?

Because it's not our job to decide what to write.

Only to listen to what wants to be written.

In the initial stages of the creative process, we owe it to ourselves to temporarily suspend the need to categorize. To be incrementalists. Otherwise, our work falls victim to *premature cognitive commitment*. This is a term social psychologists use for people become emotionally or intellectually bound to a course of action. It's the mindlessness that results after a single exposure.

For example, if we assign labels to our ideas too early—perhaps that this new piece of writing needs to become a chapter in our next book—we've just prejudged that idea's quality and value. We've forced premature cognitive commitment. And since we've already decided exactly what we're making, and our work can only be as good as that.

On the other hand, if we want our creativity to expand into unexpected territory, to be truly prolific in the things that we made, we have to keep the process objective for as long as possible. We have to work modular. And here's why:

Working modular detaches from outcomes. Which keeps us focused on the creative process, not what the creating produces. It helps us maintain a casual, relaxed attitude toward our material.

Working modular objectifies our creative process. Which creates a sense of detachment and ensures we don't fall in love with our ideas. Which opens us to criticism and feedback and possibility.

Working modular keeps the creative process open ended. Which allows material to be created within an unfinished, open loop. Which means we can always go back to add another piece to make it richer. Because good art is never finished.

Working modular makes it easy to work on multiple projects simultaneously. Which creates thought bridges, subconscious connections and integrations between seemingly unrelated ideas. Which helps us notice natural relationships and structures in our writings.

Working modular breeds consistency. Which helps us execute themes, so we're less random and our work is more a representation of our feelings and ideas. By taking a long view approach to the creative process, we're less derailed by rejection and more confident in our work.

Working modular allows our work to mature. Which allows us to remake our work as we grow and as the world changes, keeping our creative output in permanent beta, aligning ourselves with the flow of process and allowing the work to adapt and evolve.

When I consider my body of work, I've written songs, albums, sermons, cartoons, stories, books, speeches, articles, blogs, case studies, manifestos, training modules, thinkmaps, creative briefs, business strategies, affirmations, meditations, mission statements, personal constitutions, consulting programs, educational curricula and most recently, a documentary.

But they all started as modules. That's why the granular process of adding, organizing, updating, tweaking and fortifying our creative inventories is so exciting. With every new sentence or note or moment that we write down, we're multiplying our intellectual reservoir and creating a constant surplus position.

And that's where prolificacy lives.

18. KEEP SOME OF THE PROCESS ANALOG

To be digital, or not to be digital, that is the question.

At least, that's become the question for creative professionals.

I recently read a widely cited [study](#) about how our brains engage in learning differently when we work by hand. According to their research, manually manipulating and drawing things out has a significant impact on our creative process:

“When it comes to learning and remembering material, the pen is mightier than the keyboard. Writing entails using the hand and fingers to form letters. It requires more mental energy and engages more areas of the brain than pressing keys on a computer keyboard. The sequential finger movements activate multiple regions of the brain associated with processing and remembering information. And learning is enhanced when we attempt to retrieve and recreate using multiple modalities, including kinesthetic, tactile, visual, olfactory, and auditory.”

And so, the challenge becomes, do we abandon our computers completely?

Not necessarily.

On my seventeenth birthday, my high school sweetheart bought me a custom embossed [leather book cover](#). She was, after all, my first muse, so it was only fitting that I had a special book to hold all the love songs I wrote for her. And although she and I eventually drifted apart, as many first time lovers do, I never stopped using that songbook.

Almost twenty years later, even amidst the adoption of computer technology, writing software and other digital applications; even alongside my professional career as an author, publisher, consultant and laptop monkey, I still insisted on keeping some of my creative process as a analog experience.

First, for *philosophical* reasons:

I use the songbook for nostalgia's sake. It feels organic and romantic. It makes for a more intimate, interesting artifact. It allows me to think in ways hammering at a computer never could. It helps me escapes the speed and sanitized perfection of contemporary culture. It symbolizes a creative process that involves slowness, attentiveness and contemplation. And it reminds me that the more technology we have, the more people will be interested in what the human mind can create without it.

It just makes sense intellectually.

Second, I use the songbook for *practical* reasons:

Frankly, I just love the sound of a pen scratching paper. The gentle noises of the pages turning. The experience of stumbling into verbal accidents. The excitement of seeing my words stringing together on a page. The frustration of crossing out lyrics that don't make the final cut. The varying shades of ink as I apply more pen pressure because of the uncontrollable passion and excitement for certain words and phrases. And of course, the satisfaction of circling the title of a newly finished tune.

It just makes sense physically.

Plus, you never know. One man's scribble can become another man's heirloom.

Take **Detour**, for example. It's a traveling art exhibit that featured notebook creations by internationally recognized artists, architects, film directors, graphic designers, illustrators, and writers. Some works contained extensive stories, while others were converted into pieces of contemporary art and design. Still, once the exhibit was finished touring, all of the notebooks were published in a beautiful coffee table book.

I own a copy of their book, and as a physical archive, I must say, having that whole collection of three hundred handwritten notebooks makes me feel like I'm peeking into the brains of modern culture's brightest creators. My favorite section is the essay on the subject of notebooking, written by Lorin H. Stein, the editor of *The Paris Review*:

"The computer has given us permanent cold feet. No sooner do we try one thought, one rhythm or one piece on for size, we write by deletion and insertion and insertion and deletion, until at the end of a long day, we end up facing an empty screen. The notebook, by contrast, demands commitment. You write and there's no turning back. You may immediately scratch it out, but the page has been breached. There are footprints in the snow."

It's a powerful case for the analog world.

And yet, analog is not a panacea.

The goal isn't to compartmentalize our creative process into equal parts analog and digital. Life isn't always that cut and dry. Not everyone has the square footage to

maintain two different workstations. And trying to enforce a perfect balance of the two might do more harm than good.

Instead, we ought to take a closer look at our creative workflow and ask ourselves, *are there any activities that might be better served without the aid of a digital hand? Is there anything work would benefit from a more human, organic approach?* Because along the way, we may discover some corner of how we express ourselves, small as it may be, that's begging to unplug and help us get back in touch with our bodies.

I'm reminded of one of my favorite reads on this topic, *Shop Class As Soulcraft*. This book legitimately changed the way I work on a daily basis. It renewed my cultivation for manual competence. According to the author, we experience a greater sense of agency, competence and cognitive richness when we do manual work. That we must reckon with the infallible judgment of reality, where our failures or shortcomings cannot be interpreted away. And that creating in a more physical way helps us tolerate the layers of electronic bullshit that get piled on top of machines.

The point is, we owe it to ourselves and work to keep *some* of our workflow free from the constraints of digital. To stay current with our technological reality, but also to stay consistent with our analog humanity.

Ultimately, this key decision will help tighten up our creative systems and release new levels of output and expression.

II. PASSIVE

19. DIG YOUR CREATIVE WELL BEFORE YOU'RE THIRSTY

Blank pages are the enemy.

If you want to consistently generate compelling content, the trick is to ensure that there's something going on all the time, not just the moment you sit down and decide to start working. To assure your process of creation isn't driven and dictated by time pressure alone. To insure that your instrument is finely tuned for the world to move through you.

Which means, you have to dig your creative well before you're thirty.

Carlin was a thirsty guy. In the posthumous book about his prolific creative process, he explained that his brain got used to the fact that casting about for new material made it feel good. And so, it started networking on its own, making connections and comparisons, and pretty soon there was an automatic process going on all the time, one that left out unimportant or less interesting areas so it could concentrated on areas it trained itself to passively look for.

That's far out, man.

But the human brain loves this. George says it's a goal seeking, problem solving machine. And by feeding into it the parameters of what you need or want or expect, it starts to do a lot of work without you even noticing. That's what the brain does. It forms neural networks. And if you train it correctly, areas of your brain will start to communicate with one another as they notice ideas that belong together.

You're no longer working on material, the material is working on you.

This cognitive process called *unconscious rumination*.

Samuel Sinclair Baker popularized the term about fifty years ago. Born to immigrant parents over a century ago, he became a famous advertising executive in his first career, the original founder of Miracle Grow in his second career, and a bestselling author of diet and gardening books in his third career.

Prolificacy was literally second nature to him.

I bought his book, *Your Key to Creative Thinking*, at a used book fair for one dollar. And once I read the back cover about his mental strategies to help people reach greater heights of productivity than they ever thought possible, I was sold.

Unconscious rumination, he says, is when you let your mind have fun occupying itself with a variety of ideas, so that the subconscious impressions combine with your conscious efforts and realizations. You allow your inner mind to get to work mulling over, sorting out, organizing and categorizing material that has been previously absorbed. And over time, your inner brain, that's been working on a solution while you've been applying conscious thinking in other areas, speaks up. That way, the idea you want emerges at a time when the mental spotlight isn't on it.

I've personally watched this process play out in my work as a musician. Twenty plus years writing songs, and I still find myself dumfounded as to where certain lyrics and melodies and rhythms come from. Apropos of nothing, I'll be in my studio and spontaneously start strumming or singing or tapping my foot in a really interesting way and say to myself, *what the hell, where did that come from?*

Unconscious rumination, that's where.

Long before I stepped into the studio that day, my mind had been unconsciously churning away, gathering pieces of melody and lyric together like a musical jigsaw puzzle. Because the seed of any idea, sorting itself from others, may take weeks or even years to germinate and come to the surface, fused with later observations. It only seems that it is instantaneous.

You're no longer working on material, the material is working on you.

Andrew Bird is an innovative musician, songwriter, multi instrumentalist, and quite possibly the most talented whistler in the history of folk music. He's also a regular columnist for *The New York Times*, contributing occasional articles on how to write a song and other mysteries, pulling back the curtain on his creative process and the pleasures and pains of being a musician.

In one particular article, he recalls the childhood memory of learning the language of music through repetition and molding. Specifically, by chewing his cereal along to melodies, breathing in and out to music in every waking moment:

“At any moment, I’ll have half a dozen strong, fully realized melodies all filed away in my head. And when I’m waiting for a plane or walking across town, I can mentally access any of the melodies, press play, and begin fiddling with them. The goal is not to arrive at a perfectly crafted melody and stay there, but to find fertile ground where that spark of conception keeps firing every time I sit down to play.”

Andrew proves that it’s not being in the light, it’s about being there before it arrives. Or, to take it one step further, instead of waiting to be hit by the light, he decides to become the light instead.

And so, digging your creative well before you’re thirsty, then, is a passive process. It’s an unconscious experience that happens independent of your effort, since the brain seems to enjoy working alone a lot of the time.

But you’re not completely off the hook.

You still have to accumulate reference files for your brain to work on. And you have to make yourself hyperaware of unconscious rumination. But in time, you’ll soon find that consistently generating compelling content won’t be as hard as people make it out to be.

Who needs a blank page when you’ve got a bustling brain?

20. MAKE PEACE WITH PIECEMEAL

Creativity isn't a linear experience, it's an associative one.

If we want to become prolific, we have to make peace with piecemeal.

The problem is, to satisfy our basic human need for unity, order and completeness, we demand that everything have a beginning, middle and end. Human life, after all, is punctuated by a definite beginning, middle and end. And so, it's no surprise that we require everything we deal with in life to follow the same structure. Our rational capacities crave a certain amount of story. We depend on dramatic structure. It's hardwired into us. Aristotle was accurate when he said, *a whole is that which has a beginning and middle and end.*

I'm reminded of the book *The Literary Mind*, in which professor of cognitive science Mark Turner explains how story is the fundamental instrument of human thought:

“Narrative imagining, story, is our chief means of looking into, predicting, planning and explaining the future. It is a capacity indispensable to human cognition generally, and is the first way in which the mind is essentially literary.”

Looks like there's no stopping that story train.

Unfortunately, this particular human tendency is at odds with the creative process. And if we're not careful, our biological craving for resolution, our cultural need to perfectly compartmentalize everything into a neat little package with a beginning, middle and end, will stand in the way of effectively collecting, creating and communicating our ideas.

When you read the autobiography *Last Words*, it's clear why George Carlin was the undisputed heavyweight champion of standup. Not just because of his *years in* comedy, but because of his *files of* comedy. Carlin actually attests that the reason few writers have ever achieved his level of prolificacy is because they refuse to keep a record of their reactions to issues. At the end of the book, he tells the story of a journalist who once asked him if he ever thought he might run out of ideas. If he ever worried about not having anything to say anymore.

Carlin put the creative process into perspective with the following:

“Occasionally that does flash through my mind, because it’s a natural human impulse to think in terms of beginnings and endings. But the truth is, I can’t run out of ideas, not as long as I keep getting new information and I can keep processing it. And as long as I have observations to make, as long as I’m able to take impressions and compare them with old ones, I will always have material.”

And so, each one of us needs the freedom to express ourselves in a nonlinear fashion. The permission to work with ideas without strict chronological terms. The space to create without corresponding to the illusions of sequence and rational order. And the detachment from our natural human impulse to think in terms of beginnings and endings.

We need to make peace with piecemeal.

And how do we accomplish that?

By recording our incomplete, fragmentary associative process.

Creativity, after all, is nothing but a coalescence of fragments. It’s alchemy. It’s associative, not linear. Meaning, our duty as creators of ideas is to populate our content management systems, our personal creative inventories, with any snippet that crosses our cognitive path. Even if the story doesn’t have a beginning, middle or an end.

Edison famously recorded his thoughts, observations, visualizations, imaginative patterns, experiments, flashes of inspiration and ideas for new inventions in a series of notebooks. By the time of his death, he had accumulated over three thousand notebooks over his lifetime, each of which contained more than two hundred pages.

But what’s most important to remember is, the majority of his documentation was done in a raw, fragmentary, clumsy and incomplete fashion. Edison’s creative inventory—, all half million pages of it, didn’t have a definite beginning, middle and end. And yet, he still became the most prolific inventor in history.

Because he trusted the creative process. And that’s the challenge of the *input phase* of creation. Setting aside our biological need for unity, order and completeness, and trusting our raw materials into the system.

Keith Kennif has made peace with piecemeal. He’s a composer, multi instrumentalist and music producer who releases ambient electronic music under several monikers, all of which fall under his independent record label, *Unseen Music*. He’s best known for his music’s wide use in film, television, dance, advertising and performance art.

Facebook famously commissioned one of his songs for their tenth anniversary [video](#), which received hundreds of millions of views and shares.

In addition to being a daily listener of Keith's music, I'm also a diehard fan of his approach to organizing it.

His [website](#) has an astounding music library. It contains hundreds of tracks—not full songs, just *tracks*, just fragmentary associations of music—in various styles for the purposes of commercial licensing. Each track is labeled in relation to its general mood and tone, some of which are even available as alternate versions and lengths. That way, when clients submit their licensing requests, they can include all the details about their project, including media type, industry, intent of use and the like.

Keith's piecemeal approach to creating music is brilliant. In a recent [interview](#) with public radio, he explained it as follows:

“I write distilled, powerful tiny pieces of music, like mini film scores, telling so much story in so few notes. They're very simple melodies, often very simple chord changes that everybody can kind of pick up and play. That's the point and function of these songs. Everybody be able to relate to them.”

Not full songs, tracks. Hundreds of incomplete, jigsaw puzzle pieces of music. With no beginning, no middle and no end. The accumulation of which makes Kennif one of the most successful and prolific commercial musicians alive today.

Who knew?

One man's fragment is another man's fortune.

Are you treating creativity as a linear experience, or an associative one?

21. WALK THE FACTORY FLOOR

In the early stages of creation, the goal is to get your ideas to ground zero.

To offload all of the raw materials so they can be processed to their rightful inventory location. Cognitively, this closes the open loops in your mind and keeps your brain from nagging and freaking out about losing or forgetting them.

But production, the ongoing activity of crafting new ideas, is fluid experience. It's a living, breathing, evolving organism that exists on neverending artistic continuum, with no finish line in site and no constraint of completion.

And like any good foreman, you have to walk the factory floor. On a routine basis, you have to take a casual, curious and thoughtful sweep of every idea you've recently accumulated. Otherwise you lose track and overlook the quality of your inventory.

In my inventory system, all of my ideas are organized into several different categories, aka, compartments of life that are meaningful to me:

1. Creativity, Innovation & Art
2. Culture, Humanity & Society
3. Identity, Self & Soul
4. Lyrics, Poetry & Passages
5. Meaning, Mystery & Being
6. Media, Technology & Design
7. Nature, Health & Science
8. People, Relationships & Love
9. Psychology, Thinking & Feeling
10. Success, Life & Career
11. Work, Business & Organizations

Inside each folder are hundreds and sometimes thousands of ideas that I've inhaled from a multitude of inspiration sources. Most of the documents are nothing but a single sentence, although some ideas are more fleshed out than others.

The ideas are sorted in a couple of ways:

First, *chronologically*, which allows me see which ideas were created on which day. This organizing principle allows me to see fluctuations in my inspiration. For example, if I notice twenty ideas from one day but only six on another, I can reverse engineer my inhaling process to find patterns in my life that produced such results.

Second, *alphabetically*, which allows an arbitrary sorting mechanism for my ideas. This organizing principle allows me to see patterns in my inspiration. For example, if I notice a collection of eight ideas that start with the same word or phrase, I can use that as inspiration for a larger **module**.

Thanks to these sorting mechanisms, each time I walk the factory floor—, I open the various folders of ideas and just let the language wash over me as the serendipitous construction and collection of words massage my brain.

And something magical happens.

It's called *distributed cognition*.

Creativity researchers discovered this psychological process, whereby new ideas arise from combining many disparate pieces of information or concepts over an extended period of time. Turns out, visualizing a large volume of content creates a mechanism to hold your ideas and continually reflect them back to you in an objective, reviewable format. Which, in turn, helps you generate new ideas that may not have occurred to you otherwise.

Like iron filings drawn to a magnet.

George Carlin was a master of distributed cognition. Not just because he took a lot of acid in the sixties, but also because he made a habit of walking the factory floor. He once jokingly remarked to a talk show host that he was “blessed with some pretty deep files.” His creative inventory was clearly a deep source of pride for him.

During one of his **longer interviews**, he painted a vivid picture of how distributed cognition worked in his process:

“With my files, every time you see it, touch it, look at it or think about it, it gets deeper in the brain, the network gets deeper, and at some point, it gets to be a telling mass that says to you, okay you’ve got enough data, take a look at this now.”

He's not writing, he's listening for what wants to be written. He's looking down at all these hungry little beaks, all these stories waiting to be finished, and he says to them, “Which of you needs to be fed?”

Carlin proves that production truly is an open loop. Unlike processing, where the goal is to close the loop and finish the task and get the idea out of your head and into a folder, production is neverending. These ideas, these uncompleted tasks and unmet goals, tend

to pop in your mind. And because they're always growing, your brain treats them as unfinished business, as if to keep reminding you that there is a job to be done. That's why your mind keeps inserting bits of the idea into your stream of thought.

You're not working on material, the material is working on you.

And keep in mind, walking the factory floor isn't something you do every day. In fact, it's smarter to space it out a bit. The perspective of time lends texture to your ideas.

The goal is to practice the ritual often enough to give yourself an objective view of what your mind really wants to produce. And whether that means creating something out of nothing, or creating something out of something that you already knew, but didn't know you knew it, you'll be taking the right step toward prolificacy.

I challenge you to create this kind of ritual, treating it as an established parcel of structured curiosity. Try casually and thoughtfully perusing every idea you've recently accumulated, and you'll find that walking the factory floor will have a profound effect on production.

22. CREATE MEDIUM AGNOSTIC

In the movie *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, a heartbroken songwriter has this idea for a rock opera. The theme of his musical is vampires and eternal love and how men smother the women they want to be close with.

And the hook is, the writer has this vision of performing the opera with puppets.

Throughout the movie, Peter struggles to make progress with his project. He's depressed and lovelorn. His creativity gets blocked. He even feels embarrassed to share his work with anybody. But just when he starts to lose hope on his rock opera, he performs one of the songs for his new girlfriend. And she thinks the material is hysterical.

Smash cut to a sold out theater for the musical's debut performance, Peter reflects on his creative process:

"I didn't realize that my musical was a comedy, but when someone told me that, and it just opened the whole thing up."

That's what's possible when we work medium agnostic.

This is a common mantra in the digital, startup and tech world. We're seeing more and more companies who aren't attached to any one particular solution or idea, rather, they're fueled by serving the evolving needs of the users in whatever way works best. Scott Belsky, founder of the online portfolio platform, *Behance*, is famous for his position on creating medium agnostic. He believes companies should be constrained by their missions, not the media they work in. At his organization, everything they do revolves around empowering careers and organizing the creative world—but pursuing that mission through any medium possible, whether it's a blog, paper product, conference, or even an online network.

During a presentation at a recent design conference, Belsky said:

"Years ago, a company would have to define themselves primarily by their medium, saying they're a tech company or a company that puts on conferences or a blog. But in the modern day of cloud servers, open source software and seamless connection with the masses, it's easier than ever before to pursue your mission using many mediums. The cost of execution has gone down drastically, making it easier for a business to expand outside of the media they've established themselves in."

Of course, that's the startup world.

When it comes to the art world, working medium agnostic is just as applicable.

Instead of locking our work into a single path, we keep everything in permanent beta, evaluating new opportunities as they present themselves, taking into consideration our evolving assets. Instead of limiting ourselves to one vision of our capabilities, we live larger than our labels and cast a wider creative net. Instead of forcing our own expectations upon the work, we allow patterns to emerge, make use of everything we are and open our work to becoming more dimensionalized.

Because it's not our job to decide what to create, only listen for what wants to be created.

Last year, I started writing what I thought was going to be my next musical album. But when I stepped back and freed my work from that label, I let the project become what it wanted to become. And eventually, I said to myself, wait a minute, this isn't going to be record, this is going to be a documentary film.

That's what wanted to be created.

Another time, I started working on what I thought was going to be my next book. But when I got frustrated and blocked and bored of the material, I stepped back to let the project become what it wanted to become. A few days later, I had lunch with a friend who helped me realize, oh wow, this isn't going to be a book, this is going to be a college curriculum.

That's what wanted to be created.

The following interview with cartoonist Hugh Macleod comes to mind:

"We try to reverse engineer the universe from our own ego. Hilarity ensues. A winning approach for me is to just do my work to the best of my ability, and think of every project as not so much in terms of the result I want to have, but as an experiment to see if this works."

Hugh believes, as I have for many years, that with no labels, there are no limits. That when we keep the results of our work open ended, we open our work to becoming more, uncovering new territory for expansion, inviting new dimensions to our creative life.

In fact, the word *agnostic* has a fascinating history, around which there has been significant debate and controversy. From an etymology perspective, the word literally means, “without knowledge.” From a historical perspective, evolutionary biologist Thomas Henry Huxley was the first to surround the word with religious, metaphysical and spiritual implications. And from a social and culture perspective, technical and marketing literature use the word to describe an independence from parameters.

The point is, all instances of the word agnostic point to the same basic principles:

Discard prejudices. Suspend judgment. Empty yourself of expectations. Surrender control. Say yes to what is. Don't fall in love with your ideas. Put an end to the habitual anticipation of outcomes.

Listen to what wants to be created.

That's the mindset of the prolific creator.

23. WAKE UP TO WHAT'S BEEN HERE ALL ALONG

All artists create actively from the unconscious.

But there are just as many tools for doing so as there are artists to use them.

If you want to become a prolific creator, you have to practice being proactive with your unconscious mind. You have to view it as idea processor, waiting at your beck and call, begging you to assign it a problem so it can immediately go to work for you.

Because the creative mind is open twenty four hours a day.

Even when you're sleeping.

Eric Maisel, psychologist and creativity coach, pioneered a revolutionary personal development program called *sleep thinking*. It's where your brain continues to work on the issues and problems that matter to you, but while you sleep. By repeating silent questions to yourself as you drift off to dreamland, you're actually communicating with yourself about your own thoughts and feelings. Even if you're lying unconscious in a puddle of your own drool.

Maisel's hypothesis is, since the brain's natural way of working is to perform various functions while you sleep, productive thinking may as well be one of them. You simply have to surrender yourself each night to learning about your own life and what it needs from you. You have to be willing yourself to apply all of your native intelligence to the task. And you have to be willing to confront issues you're afraid to know about yourself.

That way, you can wake up to what's been here all along.

I've implemented *Sleep Thinking* several times, and had great success with the program. I found myself feeling more inspired, lucid, insightful and most importantly, relaxed with the creative process. Nothing beats waking up with good ideas every morning.

Eric's framework does, however, require heaping amounts of patience with yourself. And it takes about a week on average before anything interesting happens. But that's par for the course for any creator. Once you develop that cognitive muscle, you'll never want to go back. The simple process of asking yourself meaningful questions as you fall asleep, keeping a dream journal and then mining those experiences for insight and perspective, is a powerful way to actively help your material to work on you.

Of course, sleep thinking isn't the only practice for getting proactive with your unconscious mind. When I graduated from college and started my publishing company, I took an interest in meditation. I began practicing a number of techniques including deep breathing, hypnosis, guided imagery and progressive muscle relaxation.

What's interesting is, my motivation wasn't necessarily to increase creativity, but to decrease stress. As my therapist used to say, once those waves of anxiety come crashing in, don't let yourself get sucked into the undertow, grab a surfboard and ride the anxiety back to shore. The surfboard, naturally, was the mechanical tool of meditation, and the shore was my relaxed state of being.

Which was an appropriate metaphor for meditation, considering the timeless advice from surrealist filmmaker and meditation advocate, David Lynch:

"Ideas are like fish. The little ones swim on the surface, but the big ones, the fish that are more powerful, pure, abstract and beautiful, swim down below. And so, if you can expand the container you're fishing in, your subconscious, you can catch bigger fish."

That's precisely what meditation did for me. Over time, as the practice became a staple in my daily routine, my creative container got bigger. Much bigger. The practice helped me catch the big fish as they swam by. Meditation allowed me wake up to what had been there all along.

But everyone wakes up in their own unique way. As I make my daily rounds, poring over interviews with a variety of creators from a diverse range of websites, blogs and podcasts, I'm constantly fascinated by each artist's approach to tapping into the unconscious mind.

Especially the more, ahem, *organic* approaches.

Kevin Smith, veteran filmmaker and quite possibly the most prolific podcaster of all time, also happens to be a prolific pot smoker. He's an outspoken advocate for the effects of marijuana on creativity, touting its ability to stimulate divergent thinking, encourage the chasing of whimsies, knock down his creative inhibitions, increase the capacity for wonder and awe, and of course, turn off his inner editor while writing.

In fact, he made a deal with himself when he started smoking:

"Instead of watching television all day and upholding the stoner stereotype, if I am ever going to smoke, I will tie it to something creative or productive."

Not surprisingly, Kevin's views on drugs became somewhat controversial as. But there is a fascinating footnote to his smoke filled story. Smith says that every once in awhile, some web troll or film critic will suggest that he's become a lazy stoner who doesn't produce anything anymore. So now, at the beginning of every year, he writes a blog post that provides an accounting of his time in the previous year. And in the past few years, each year's list usually includes hundreds of podcasts, live performances, television shows and at least two movies.

So much for the stereotype.

Ultimately, there are many roads that lead to the unconscious mind. Some sleep strategically, some meditate regularly, some intoxicate judiciously.

But the goal is always the same. If you want to become a prolific collector, creator and communicator of ideas, identify which tools and rituals and practices will most actively allow you to work from the unconscious.

And you can wake up—or *bake* up—to what's been here all along.

24. LOOK FOR AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE

Eventually, it comes to time to stop creating and start judging.

You have to look for an organizing principle.

I'm reminded of a fascinating interview I heard with Conan O'Brien about his life as a late night talk show host. He told the interviewer that his show was the organizing principle of his life. That it was the iron rod in the center around which everything else gravitated.

Your work is the same way.

Whatever it is that you're creating or crafting or communicating, there has to be a core assumption, a central reference point, a guiding pole, which governs action and allows everything else in its proximity to derive value.

For two reasons:

First, the organizing principle keeps you on track as the *idea creator*. It makes it easier to align, organize, remember and deliver everything you're trying to communicate. Otherwise you're just vomiting.

Second, the organizing principle keeps your audience on track as the *idea consumer*. It makes it easier to listen, digest, remember and apply everything they're trying to receive. Otherwise they're just inhaling.

The question is, how do you find it?

When I wrote my first book, I remember hitting a wall. Most of the writing was done, but when it came to the process of organizing the material, I was stuck. So my mentor suggested that I buy a box of index cards, write down one idea per card, scatter them on the floor, stare at them in silence for a few minutes, and then allow the inherent geometry of the ideas take shape.

It sounded like an interesting experiment, so I gave it a shot.

And I'll never forget what happened next.

The ideas started to take on a life of their own. They started to find each other. And as I surveyed hundreds of index cards on the carpet, I had this feeling that they weren't just speaking to each other, they were speaking to me, too. Announcing that they had done the work of sorting themselves, and all they needed was a helping hand to rearrange them into specific piles.

Sure enough, those piles become chapters, which ultimately became the organizing principle of my book.

Who knew it was that easy?

It's like Alan Fletcher used to say, he always knew he was onto something because instead of him looking at the subject, the subject began looking at him.

Since that initial experiment, I've run that notecard exercise hundreds of times, both in my own work on books, speeches, training videos and other creative projects. But I've also taught that exercise to my clients and workshop participants, using a diverse range of topics. And in my experience, it's the single most effective method for identifying the organizing principle of a creative project.

Because it's not an accident, it's *self-organization*.

Neuroscientists purportedly discovered this process in the forties and fifties, although its conceptual roots most likely date back to the ancient Greeks. Regardless, the working definition of *self-organization* is a process where some form of global order or coordination arises out of the local interactions between the components of an initially disordered system. In my case, the "local interactions" were the hundreds of individual notecards, and the "global order" was the dozen or so piles.

However, the most popular examples of self-organizing systems include the creation of structures by social insects like honeybees and ants, the flocking behavior of mammals like birds and fish, and of course, the ultimate self-organizing system, the human brain.

The book *Brain Based Therapy* said it best:

"Neuroscientists view the brain as a self-organizing system that is malleable and plastic. The brain continually pulls itself up by the bootstraps, becoming more organizing and patterned over time. This habit of neurons organizing themselves into networks of thousands and even millions of cells is a psychological phenomenon, and it is impossible to overstate the significance of this simple idea."

It's a beautiful thing. There truly is harmony within hierarchy.

And the exciting part is, once you identify the organizing principle of your work, once the internal framework announces itself, everything else collects itself around it. And the next thing you know, you're borrowing energy from the ideas themselves. You immediately start to watch your project or idea or creation start to take shape and acquire real structure and meaning and weight.

Because initially, ideas come together the way galaxies do, they just naturally clump, simply because they're related, like an extended family of ideas around a general topic. But over time, they become parts that fit and function together, which you then gradually form into a whole.

And that's when the work transitions from idea to execution.

Next time you find yourself complaining, "I have enough ideas, but now I need to figure out what to do with them," consider running some variation of the index card exercise. Put your brain to work to find the inherent geometry of your project. Let the ideas talk to themselves, and then let them talk to you.

Before you know it, the organizing principle will stand up and reveal itself.

And you'll be off to the creative races.

PART 3 – OUTPUT:
THE CREATIVE SEASON OF
EXECUTION

I. IDENTITY

25. CONFRONT THE REALITIES OF YOUR CREATIVE INCLINATIONS

Sundance knew he shot better when he moved.

When he applied for the job as the payroll guard, the crotchety old miner told him to hit the tobacco plug, but with no fancy footwork and no quick draw theatrics. *I just need to see if you can shoot the damn thing*, he says.

He stands there, aims, shoots and misses by a yard. But right when the old man starts to walk away, he looks back at the target and famously asks, “Can I move?”

And before we know it, Sundance holsters his gun, draws and fires from the hip in the classic western tradition, and the bullets connect while the tobacco plug jumps and bucks around the dirt. He’s hired on the spot.

Do you have that level of understanding about your own work?

If so, becoming a prolific communicator will come naturally to you. Creativity, after all, is a function of identity. You can’t have one without the other. Whatever kind of work you do, what you make will be inextricably connected to what you are.

That’s why the theme of identity is so prevalent in my work. Not just because I wear a nametag twenty four seven, but because few things fascinate me more than the formation, nuance, complexity and absurdity of why people are the way they are. And so, after writing a handful of books of the subject, here are a few truths I’ve come to realize:

You can’t run from who you are. You take yourself with you, wherever you go. And your identity chooses you, not the other way around. No matter how hard you work to kick nature out, your truest self will always bubble up the surface. When Michelangelo famously said the sculpture was inside the stone, he wasn’t talking about art, he was talking about us. What you make can’t not come from what you are.

This is great news.

Because once you reach a certain level of understanding about how you work and how you're wired, there's no stopping you from hitting your target. Once you confront the realities of your creative temperaments and inclinations, the likelihood of hitting the wall is drastically lower. And once you identify what's already true for you, it's easier to tap into your native endowments of creativity, motivation, inspiration and intelligence.

Take attention deficit disorder. This condition negatively affects millions of people each year and it results in a great deal of emotional pain, disappointment and in some cases, pharmacological side effects. And yet, I've read inspiring stories about people who channel their condition into artistic superpowers like multitasking, detail management and writing wicked technical punk rock songs.

But there are two sides to every cognitive coin.

On the other side of the fence, I'm one of those weirdos with hyperfocus, or as my wife likes to call it, *reverse attention deficit disorder*. I tend to become intensely engrossed with the task at hand, to the point where all emotion drains from my face, I lose complete awareness of my surroundings and disappear inside myself like a sea turtle. One morning I was so zoned out during a writing binge that I spilled hot tea down my pants and didn't even notice.

But that's just me. Routine and symmetry and structure are the organizing principles of my life. I'm hypersensitive about anything that offends my sense of order. I'm compulsive about looking for recurring cycles of activity in my surroundings. I'm regimented about deepening my pattern reserves on a daily basis. And I'm relentless about twisting myself into a psychological pretzel trying to compartmentalize the world around me.

And yet, I usually find a way to channel this hyperfocus into productive, meaningful work that's useful to others. Because there's always way to channel your limitations in the service of making your ideas happen.

Otherwise, the more mysterious your own creative process becomes for you, the greater your fear the well is going to run dry.

Confront the realities of your creative inclinations.

There's no telling how many plugs of tobacco you might hit.

26. FIND YOUR BACON

Dogs can teach us a lot about motivation.

I'm reminded of the Beggin Strips commercial:

Bacon! Bacon! Where's the bacon? I smell bacon. It's gotta be bacon. There's only one thing in the world that smells like bacon and that's bacon! There it is! It's in the bag! Chewy, yummy smokey bacon! Oh boy oh boy oh boy, num num num num num, it's bacooooooooon!

That's motivation. And we all have our own version of this moment. Those triggers that freeze time, make our left eyelid twitch, activate our deepest cravings and human hungers and move us to execution. Those currencies that, when sniffed out, override our excuses, tap into our natural motivations and drive us to do things.

I have a client who's obsessed with personal improvement. As a recovering academic and a higher education advocate, learning isn't just what she does, it's who she is. She even warns the people she works with, *if you want to get me to do anything, I better be learning something new.*

And that's why she's so prolific. Learning is her bacon.

The goal is to find your bacon. *To figure out why you do what you do.*

Once you know that, anything is possible. Once you identify the small collection of intrinsic triggers that stoke your creative fire, nothing can stop you. Once you learn how to activate your own internal generators, there's no reason you can't become a prolific collector, creator and communicator of ideas.

But you have to dig down through the many levels of why. You have to flesh out the drivers that motivate you on an hourly basis.

One exercise for doing so is to sit down and physically map out every single decision you made on a given day. Phone calls you made, conversations you had, food you consumed, activities you did, people you saw, ask yourself, *literally*, why did you do what you did?

The first time I tried this exercise, I uncovered profound truths about myself. I discovered that most of my behaviors can be traced back to one of the following:

A blank canvas. Making things has always been the most natural way for me to engage with the world. When I get up in the morning, there's a mechanism inside me that says what I'm supposed to make next. And so, I am motivated by the freedom to express myself.

A personal ritual. I can motivate myself to do just about anything, as long as there's a ritual attached to it. Ritual is an intentional, purposeful experience I layer on top of an activity to make it more meaningful. I have one for everything I do. And so, I am motivated by a repeatable process.

A captive audience. I believe human interaction is a divine transaction. Engaging with people, even for a moment at a time, fuels me. Every time I go out of my way to earn people's attention, I reward them for giving it to me. And so, I am motivated by a chance to perform.

An interesting problem. Creativity is my gift. As a lifelong thinker, the moment something activates the problem solving impetus of my brain, my body has a physical reaction. I start obsessing, imagining and zealously deconstructing everything in my path until the internal monologue stops. And so, I am motivated by challenging situations.

A meaningful contribution. I'm genetically wired for hard work. It's just my nature. I'm happier when I'm being productive and prolific. There is a place in me that starves if I go more than a few days without nudging the world in a positive direction. And so, I am motivated by the chance to work.

That's my bacon. That's why I do what I do.

What about you?

A similar exercise for uncovering your natural motivations is to plug yourself into the following formulas:

I can feel like I've achieved a return on investment, as long as _____.

I can rationalize anything, as long as it has something to do with _____.

I can accomplish anything, as long as I have the organizing principle of _____.

I can stick with a new behavior, as long as I can find a way to incorporate _____.

I can trick myself into doing something daily, but only if I get the chance to _____.

These exercises require a lot of personal reflection. And they often feel like we're tricking ourselves into taking action. But we all have to be a little deluded to stay motivated. And as collectors, creators and communicators of ideas, our work demands that we become masters of activating own internal generators.

Find your bacon.

27. DON'T RUN FROM YOUR LIMITATIONS, LEVERAGE THEM

I met a travel photographer who had an fascinating philosophy.

He said natural lighting was the only way he worked.

Not only because of the image quality, which was often stronger than staged lighting, but mainly because he didn't want to schlep all his heavy equipment through foreign countries for weeks at a time. Imagine marching through a rainforest carrying flashes, umbrellas, light boxes, reflectors, backdrops, accessories, optical slaves, power supplies and metal stands.

What a nightmare.

Interestingly, because of his decision to only use natural lighting, he never committed to one particular photographic aesthetic. He never stylized himself into a corner. Which meant he was able to experiment with a variety of different approaches. And as a result, that freed him to evolve his visual voice as he saw fit, solidifying his reputation as an interesting, versatile and unique photographer.

Adrienne didn't run from his limitations, he leveraged them.

And I remember thinking to myself, *I wonder if this happens in other fields?*

You bet.

There's the **musician**, whose early records were limited to three minutes on a side. That put pressure on him to keep the pieces short, but helped him become a master at creating short, concise musical statements that were close to perfect.

There's the **commercial artist**, whose day job gave him a steady income that allowed him to delve into each chosen project without having to worry about a deadline or a panic to sell. That allowed his pieces to become complete on their own schedule.

There's the **photographer**, whose antique photograph paper had a chemistry that was overly sensitive to ultraviolet light. This allows his white and featureless skies to become strong graphic elements in his pictures that echoed the shape of the land.

There's the **painter**, whose vision dimmed due to macular degeneration. But since he couldn't see the details of the canvas anyway, his conditioned enhanced his impressionistic painting style.

There's the **standup comedian**, whose incurable perfectionism forced him to develop jokes glacially. But since he waited sometimes years for punchlines to full ripen, that allowed for breakthroughs he wouldn't reach otherwise.

There's the **homebuilder**, whose client had a severe slope in her land, which inspired him to add terraces, stonework, waterfalls, and extensive landscaping. As a result, he created an unexpected feeling of calm and contentment for the residents.

There's the **choreographer**, whose principal dancer was struck by a motor scooter and couldn't perform the traditionally powerful moves. But he exploited her stillness to powerfully evoke the feeling of loss and separation between her and the other dancer.

There's the **rock band**, whose nominal music skill and crappy equipment forced them create unconventional performances with props, staging, masks and costumes. These elements later became a crucial component to their mysterious brand persona.

Each of these artists leveraged their limitations.

How are you leveraging yours?

I remember when I first transitioned from being a full time artist to being a full time employee. Initially, I was concerned. Because now that I had a new day job, I also had a serious time limitation. And I wondered how that might affect my output.

But because my creative work had become a supplementary source of income, I began making art independent of my need to make money and keep the lights on. That freed my ideas from the burden of having to support myself. And I found that creativity wasn't as claustrophobic anymore, now that I wasn't worrying about money as much. Ultimately, by removing the acute business pressure that previously hung over my head, I experienced a newfound artistic sovereignty that allowed me to experiment with new mediums and genres and ideas.

I leveraged my limitations.

It's a form of optimism, really.

Which doesn't increase your success, but what it *does* increase is your field of vision, and that allows you to better notice the opportunities that *lead* to success.

I'm reminded of this fascinating interview I heard between a physician and a cancer survivor. Recounting his diagnosis experience, the patient said:

“If you have a bad attitude about your disease, odds are, you won't get better, because you won't do the necessary research on the resources that will make you better. You'll never find the solution that leads to the solution. That's the physical and procedural manifestation of a bad attitude. Mindset may not affect the outcome, but it does affect the experience.”

In this way, leveraging your limitations becomes part of your expanded field of vision. It's not about mind over matter, it's about using your mind to allow more things to matter, so you can expose yourself to the best solution.

Think of it as a filter.

In the production management world, factories and organizations call this the *theory of constraints*, in which they identify the limitation, decide how to exploit it, and then restructure everything in the system around it.

Which sound like dry, dense corporate speak—and it is—but it's also a useful filter for approaching your creative work. The artist's journey, after all, is a journey of revealing to yourself what you love, who you are and who you aren't. And so, the goal of the filter is to embrace the entirety of your personality, not just your strengths. To creatively channel your liabilities, play the ball where it lies and make the most of what you've got.

Don't run from your limitations, leverage them.

Constraints are catapults.

28. THE POWER OF POLYAMOROUS CREATION

I once read a fantastic book called *Realizing The Impossible*, an anthology of commentaries and images on the relationship between art and social movements. The book gathered contributions from around the globe, both from current artists and historical creators, curating a vibrant history and overview of political art.

This [interview](#) with multidisciplinary artist Shaun Silber said it best:

“The best artists have shit on their shoes. They’re running around in the middle of everything, they can’t settle down, they can’t shut up and they can’t quit fidgeting with everything.”

What’s interesting is, if you study the world’s most prolific creators, they all work the same way. They’re masters of *polyamorous creation*, or, working on multiple projects simultaneously.

The term polyamory is the hybrid of the words *poly*, meaning “multiple,” and the word *amor*, meaning “love.” The controversial idea first penetrated public consciousness in the seventies, but its definition has been researched, redefined and revisited by a number of accredited institutions over the years. In the romantic sense, here’s the essence of the philosophy:

“Polyamory is the practice, state or ability of having more than one intimate, loving relationship at the same time, with the full knowledge and consent of all partners involved.”

Obviously, there’s much criticism around the topic. Issues of relational stability and marital longevity have been widely debated, researched, even satirized by a number of cable and reality television shows.

But that’s not the point I’m trying to make.

I’m interested in the concept of polyamory from the perspective of a creator, not a couple. I’m interested in transferring polyamory from the interpersonal domain to intellectual domain. In this regard, it’s not about pursuing relationships with multiple romantic partners, it’s about *pursuing relationships with multiple creative projects*.

Our artistic endeavors, after all, are living, breathing things, with which we have intimate relationships. Ask any artist in the world, and they'll agree there is a profound connection between the creator and the creation.

But as the definition of polyamory suggests, *there is a full knowledge and consent of all partners involved*. Meaning, the act of dividing your love and attention among several creative works doesn't automatically lessen it. Just because you're juggling multiple projects simultaneously, doesn't mean you love either of them any less because of the existence of the other.

I have a writer friend who's incapable of polyamorous creation. It drives me crazy. Whenever his latest book enters into the editing and design phase, he refuses to work on his next project in limbo. As if doing so would be the equivalent of cheating on his current project.

And I always tell him, look, just because you switch gears midstream and dive into another creative endeavor, doesn't make you any less focused, efficient or loyal to your current pursuit.

In fact, it's quite the opposite.

Albert Bandura is one of the most frequently cited and influential psychologists of all time. He originated the theoretical construct of *self-efficacy*, which is the belief in your own ability to succeed and achieve the goals you set for yourself. In his [research](#) on the cognitive functioning of creative thinkers, here's what he found:

“People’s creative efforts are more productively deployed when they pursue multiple projects simultaneously, at varying stages of completion, shifting among them as circumstances dictate. In doing so, they’re less likely to succumb to the impediments, false starts, inevitable delays and distractions of the creative process, and more likely to experience greater productivity and goal attainment.”

How many creative irons do you have in the fire?

Next, when you practice polyamorous creation, it also produces positive interactions between projects. In my current workload, I'm building a course curriculum, writing a book, producing a documentary and a composing musical album. Initially, each project was mutually exclusive. Unique in its own right. Four different mediums, audiences and messages. But over time, the projects began to bump into each other. And I couldn't help but notice thought bridges, cross fertilizations, subconscious connections, natural relationships and unexpected integrations between them.

As a result, that unconscious integration allowed me to quickly, easily and effectively transition from one project to another on a daily basis. And that contributed to a greater consistency in my body of work and overall artistic vision.

Proving, that our creations may be multiple, but the creator is singular.

Are your ideas talking to each other?

Of course, the question of polyamorous creation is, *how do you know when it's time to switch gears between projects?*

That all depends on your schedule, rhythms, natural energy cycles, creative preferences and environments. As I've mentioned before, the great creative discipline is simply knowing what season it is. Developing an **exquisite understanding** of your own timing. Listening for what wants to be written.

Scott Adams, cartoonist and entrepreneur, says one of the most important tricks for maximizing productivity is matching your mental state to the task.

“When I first wake up, my brain is relaxed and creative. The thought of writing a comic is fun, and it's relatively easy because my brain is in exactly the right mode for that task. But I also know from experience that trying to be creative in the midafternoon is a waste of time. At six in the morning I'm a creator, and by two in the afternoon, I'm a copier.”

How does your physical body dictate your creative body of work?

And keep in mind, just because you're working on multiple projects, doesn't mean you're not focused. In fact, it's quite the opposite. You're more focused than ever. Focus, as I've mentioned before, isn't about activity, it's about identity. Keeping all your passions in play, while still staying true you dominant reality. Not hammering one nail all your life, but hammering lots of nails, *one way*, all your life. And believing that doesn't matter how many different things you do, it matters that you're the same person when you do them.

Polyamorous creation, then, is not about spreading yourself too thin. It's not about procrastination. It's not about chasing too many rabbits. It's not about becoming a jack of all trades. It's not about accumulating a bunch of unfinished projects. And it's not about placing too many cumbersome demands on yourself.

It's about hedging your creative bets.

It's about insuring yourself against the daily discouragements, delays, distractions, depressions, derailments and disappointments of the creative process. And in many cases, that means giving yourself permission to go work on something else.

New project receive an unflattering review? *Go work on something else.*

Editor move the final deadline back two weeks? *Go work on something else.*

Meaning starting to drain from your current endeavor? *Go work on something else.*

Computer freeze at an inopportune time? *Go work on something else.*

Client go on vacation and forget about your website? *Go work on something else.*

Receive a rejection letter from a publisher? *Go work on something else.*

Stuck on a song lyric that just won't rhyme? *Go work on something else.*

Spirit won't move the way you want it to? *Go work on something else.*

Every day I read interviews everyday with artists, songwriters, painters, designers and other creative professionals, and they all echo the same sentiment. Prolific creators know resistance will eventually rear its ugly head, and so they always have something waiting in the wings, ready to be worked on. By differentiating and diversifying between a number of main lines of activity, when one enterprise grinds to a halt, productive work does not cease because there is enough momentum to keep the story moving forward.

With only one iron in the fire, you wouldn't have the freedom to do that.

Ultimately, polyamorous creation, the practice of pursuing relationships with multiple creative projects, is a proven strategy that allows you to be both prolific with, and protective of, your artistic work.

Don't be afraid to get some shit on your shoes.

29. LEARN TO RENDER YOURSELF WHOLE.

Prolific communicators integrate.

That's a big word for me, *integrate*.

It literally means, "to render something whole." And the people who master this art, actually, it's more of a way of being, really, bring substantial value to those around them. They become prolific in every sense of the word.

The challenge is, integration can't be taught. There's no formula or system or seminar. But it *can* be modeled. Let's explore a collection of examples from a variety of industries and disciplines to inspire you to become more integrated in your work.

Zapponians are encouraged to bring unrelated passions to the work environment. In their culture book, one employee wrote, "It's like a game to see what part of ourselves we can bring to work every day." Sounds like a dream job to me. Integrating means making use of everything you are. *What unique aspect of your personality can you enlist to help you work?*

Billy Jean King, hall of fame tennis player and advocate for sexual equality famously said, "Bring all of yourself to everything you do." She's right. Halfway will be the end of you. Integration means fulfilling your whole capacity for living. *Do you have the freedom to use the talents you might never exercise anywhere else?*

Mike Arauz from the digital agency, Undercurrent talked about hiring square shaped people, "It's not just surface knowledge, it's going deep enough to be dangerous on an expansive landscape of interconnected knowledge that quickly makes you a powerful recombinant thinker and inventor." That's what allows you to participate in deep, thoughtful conversations about anything. Even offer meaningful advisement off the cuff. *Do you know a little about a lot or a lot about a lot?*

Conan O'Brien, the funniest man on the planet, once told a story about the best piece of advice he'd ever been given. Johnny Carson said, "You will use everything you've ever learned." That's one hell of a memory. Integrating means refilling and accessing your mental reservoir. *What's your routine for documenting and organizing your daily learnings?*

Scott Adams famously admitted, “I succeeded as a cartoonist with negligible art talent, some basic writing skills, an ordinary sense of humor and a bit of experience in the business world. Dilbert is a combination of all four skills. The world has plenty of better artists, smarter writers, funnier humorists and more experienced business people. The rare part is that each of those modest skills is collected in one person. That’s how value is created.” Everyone should be so lucky to fire on all cylinders. Integrating means meaningful contribution through masterful combination. *Is everything you do designed to give you a stronger base?*

Jerry Seinfeld is a master of integration. He famously told Howard Stern, “I’m never not working on material. Every second of my existence I’m thinking, can I do something with that?” That’s what billionaires do, they leverage everything. Integrating means killing two stones with one bird. *What’s your system for accumulating more firepower into your creative arsenal?*

Douglas Hofstadter, a professor and author and Pulitzer Prize winner, penned a fantastic article on the topic of creative integration. He said, “Anything I think about becomes part of my professional life.” Amen to that. Workers of the mind, unite! Integrating means rolling your snowball down an infinite hill. *How do you expand your repertoire a little bit more with each thought?*

Robert Downey Jr. is perhaps the greatest comeback character of his generation. He was described as an artist who, “Will eat almost anything, idea wise, or he’ll at least chew on it.” He takes in everything available. He never meets an idea he doesn’t like. Integration means guarding your curiosity against exhaustion. *Do you embroider the accumulated threads of daily observation into a striking tapestry of innovative thinking?*

The key to remember is, integration takes a long time, a lot of practice and a high level of maturity. It flows from a complete openness to yourself, even the parts you view as liabilities.

As a creator, it’s a spiritual imperative.

Because at the heart of what it means to be an artist is bringing value and light and joy and meaning to the people around you by integrating everything you bring to the table.

30. UPDATING THE STORY YOU TELL YOURSELF

Writing always came naturally to me.

It was the only thing I can't remember not doing.

But when it came time to switch gears from words to images, when teachers or parents asked me to start designing and illustrating and sketching, I froze like a bag of peas. My standard excuse was, *I couldn't draw a straight line if my life depended on it.*

At least, that was the story I told myself.

Fast forward a few decades, and I landed a job that would require me to do a substantial amount of drawing. Nothing overly technical, and nothing that required a fine arts degree, but I *was* working at a design and innovation company, and our bread and butter was thinking and communicating visually.

I was terrified. All those childhood fears of drawing came floating up to the surface. And whether or not I *thought* I could draw, didn't matter anymore. Whether or not I *feared* the process of creating images instead of words, was irrelevant. This was my job now, and I had no choice.

So I just started moving the pen.

As a result, I started breaking my isolation, getting out of my head, ordering my reactions to the world and placing my ideas and feelings in a concrete form outside myself. And after a few weeks of noodling around, the result evolved into something really interesting. I called it a **thinkmap**. This was a large scale, illustrated whiteboard mural that combined research, storytelling and insight. I created it for our team to use during client workshops as a strategic framework for sharing ideas and observations. Also, what we learned was, from a professional services standpoint, a thinkmap was a powerful act of generosity, thoughtfulness and personalization

But what surprised me was, once clients and coworkers and friends started seeing these thinkmaps in person and online, there was an immediate reaction. They started asking questions and giving compliments and telling their friends and even taking pictures of the murals on the wall. And I thought to myself, *huh, maybe I'm not as bad at drawing as I thought.*

I was no longer terrified.

Because life rewards the actions we take, not the assumptions we make.

So whatever preexisting beliefs I had about my drawing abilities, or lack thereof, vanished. I read the writing on the wall, quite literally, and it said that I no longer sucked at drawing. And now, instead of proclaiming that I was just a writer, deflecting people's comments with the justification that I couldn't draw a straight line if my life depended on it, I just said, *I'm good at thinking and communicating visually.*

I updated the story I told myself.

This reminds me of a classic episode of *Justice League*, in which Flash and Batman are captured, thrown into a prison cell and locked to metal gurneys. But just when you think all hope is lost, Flash uses his superhuman reflexes to speed up his pulse so the heart monitor reports him as flatlining. This fools the guard into unlocking the door to come and check on him, which gives him the perfect opportunity to escape. Once he punches out the guard and frees up his companion, Batman says, "I didn't know you could do that," to which Flash admits, "Neither did I."

It's an incredible moment. And it happens to all of us.

You spontaneously do something you didn't realize you could do, and that experience illuminates what's possible. It inspires you to expand to your full capacity. It allows you to live larger than you labels. And that initiates an internal revolution.

The word revolution, after all, comes from the term *revolvere*, which literally means to roll back. And so, this moment, where you do something you didn't realize you could do, triggers the rolling back of old skin. The shedding of an outdated way of speaking about your identity. And that inspires you to employ new language to describe who you are.

You update the story you tell about yourself.

There's a great scene in the movie *Life of Pi*, in which Patel finds himself shipwrecked, out of supplies and forced to break his lifelong habit of vegetarianism in order to survive. Worse yet, he has to do so while fighting for his food with a four hundred pound tiger.

But in his moment of triumph, Patel wrestles his dinner away from the beast and sates his appetite. Then, with a mouth full of fish he admits, "Hunger can change everything you ever thought you knew about yourself."

It's that same moment.

You discover pieces of yourself that, until to this point, went undernurtured. And all it took was that one experience, that one word of encouragement, or that one flash of inspiration, to make you forget the story you told yourself, unlock a latent ability and do something you never thought you could.

And the great human irony is, you're often the last one to recognize your own value. You're simply too close to yourself. You don't have the eyes to see your highest abilities. And you need people in your life to be mirrors and witnesses and encouragers. The ones who make sure your potential doesn't go to waste.

Recently a friend of mine spontaneously and nonchalantly demonstrated a skill he'd been practicing his whole life, but didn't realize it was a superpower. Psychologists would call this his *unconscious competence*, since he had so much practice with that skill that it became second nature and could be performed easily.

So I started asking him about it:

Wait, what did you just do? Where did you learn that? Is that something you do all the time? Can you teach me how to do that?

Johnny chuckled a bit, but only because he was just being himself. Doing what he does. And he had no idea how valuable that really was. Turns out, he just needed somebody to see him for those gifts. To help him update the story he told about himself.

The point is, people can talk themselves in and out of any identity.

But to find our highest selves, it's better to let our actions have the final word.

31. LEAVE NO ASSET UNHARVESTED

The other day I was listening to an interview with a successful cartoon voice actor. When asked about his work experience at a major television network, he said the best about his job was, *they used every part of him like a buffalo.*

We should all be lucky enough to work that way.

Firing on all cylinders, making use of everything we are, exploiting talents we didn't know we had, keeping all of our passions in play, using our strengths to do what we do best and leaving no faculty untapped.

Just like the indigenous people.

According to the book *The Mystic Warriors of the Plains*, two hundred years ago, buffalo actually outnumbered humans by a factor of twenty. It's no surprise, then, that they became a veritable one stop shop for the early settlers. Clocking in at no less than two thousand pounds, buffalo were used for just about everything:

The meat? Breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks.
The tail? Fly brushes, lodge decorations and whips.
The buckskin? Clothing, lance covers, bags and cases.
The hooves? Glue, rattles, hatchets or butchering mallets.
The horns? Cups, fire carriers, spoons, ladles, signals and toys.
The hair? Headdresses, saddle filler, pillows, rope and ornaments.

The dung? Fuel for cooking and heating.
The sinew? Ropes, cords, bow strings and thread.
The innards? Containers, tobacco pouches and baby rattles.
The bones? Needles, ground pegs, decorations and religion artifacts.
The tallow? Healing ointments, mixing paints, food sealers and glue.
The rawhide? Medicine bags, shields, buckets, knife cases and horse stirrups.

That's what you call creating value. In the today's culture, the buffalo would make employee of the month, every month, until they retired.

And so the question is, in a world constantly conspiring to make us less than we are, filled with people invested in keeping us in our lane, how can we be more like the buffalo? How can we avoid limiting ourselves to one vision of our capabilities?

Fortunately, there's no right way to do it. There are as many career paths as there are people to take them. Let's explore a few of them.

A few years ago, I had two epiphanies.

First, that I was bored, burned out and lonely after working for myself for twelve straight years. Second, that I had no desire to scale in order to burn out even more.

I decided to go on summer sabbatical, in search of the next stone on my professional path and discern the future horizon of my work. During those three months, I read a book that had a profound effect on my decision called *The Startup of You*, written by Reid Hoffman, entrepreneur, venture capitalist and the cofounder of LinkedIn. His observations were as follows:

“Instead of locking yourself into a single career path, keeping your career in permanent beta, forcing yourself to acknowledge that you have bugs, that there's new development to do on yourself, and that you will need to adapt and evolve.”

Eventually, I made the decision to stay true my entrepreneurial spirit, while still enlarging my concept of work itself. I ended up taking a full time job that allowed me to continue to expand my journey by day, while holding onto my own unique brand, business and artistic endeavors by night.

This couldn't have been a healthier path for me. Embracing the best of both worlds, holding down a day job, but also keeping all my passions in play by investing in multiple containers of meaning, was incredibly satisfying. Because even though I changed my narrative to connote a different meaning, it was still one that remained true to reality.

I'm reminded of something my mentor said that I'll never forget:

“The definition of work, of career, of what is and is not a business, are forever altered and can be molded to fit anything that excites and feeds your soul, if you choose to explore it intentionally. Your option for how to create fulfilling work is only limited by your imagination's ability to create scenarios that excite you.”

So that's one path.

But what about this one?

Jared Leto, who first achieved mainstream recognition as an actor in the nineties, also successfully pursued careers as a musician, director, producer, activist, philanthropist, photographer, filmmaker and businessman.

He's one of my favorite multihyphenates. Plus he has dreamy eyes.

During a recent interview, he said that a few years ago, he sought out to make another film for the first time in four years, just to see if there was anything else left in that world for him.

Apparently, there was.

Leto's groundbreaking performance as a transgender woman in *Dallas Buyers Club* received critical acclaim and earned him an Oscar, Golden Globe, Critics Choice and Screen Actor's Guild Award.

But the best part was, once award season was over, he was back on tour with his band, traveling the world, playing music for millions of screaming fans.

Leto proves that we have a responsibility to remake ourselves as we grow and as the world changes. To allow ourselves the freedom to change as we discover. To evaluate new opportunities as they present themselves. And to consider our evolving intellectual and experiential assets, always willing to change direction based on what we've learned. Even if that means circling back to something we haven't done in years.

There's a fantastic passage in *The Artist's Way* about very idea, about remaking ourselves every few years in order to pursue something exciting and new:

“In order to grow as artists, we must be willing to risk. We must try to do something more and larger than what we have done before. We cannot continue indefinitely to replicate the successes of our past. Great careers are characterized by great risks. It takes courage to jettison the mantle of what we have done well for the chance to grab at the cape of what we might do even better. We cannot play it safe and expand as artists at the same time. We must risk expanding our territory.”

So that's another path.

But what about this one?

A career, after all, is the feedback about the self that comes in response to the work. And sometimes that means gaining clarity around what's *not* for us.

During a recent public radio interview, Jerry Seinfeld was asked if he ever considered a movie career, to which he replied, “What I do is the only thing that makes sense to me. I’m a standup comedian, and that’s what I call myself. As for acting, I don’t think the world needs me to do that.”

I like a man who knows who he is.

Which doesn’t mean Jerry’s *not* exploring new ways of being an artist, he simply doesn’t see another corridor for himself right now. And you have to respect that kind of artistic boundary.

So that’s another path.

And the good news is, there are a thousand more. And no two are the same. Each one comes replete with its unique set of challenges, rewards, experiences and learnings.

But whatever path you choose—or perhaps whatever path chooses you—what matters most is that you make use of everything you are.

The way I see it, as long as you’re going to spend you life weaving a story about yourself, you may as well blow the ceiling off of anything resembling a limitation.

Be like the mighty buffalo.

Leave no asset unharvested.

32. TOUCHED BY A HAND, STRUCK BY A FIST

The other day a friend of mine was telling a story about his wife.

Once upon a time, her indy apparel company was featured on one of the biggest television shows in the world. As the narrative often goes, within hours of the broadcast, the company received so many new orders that they couldn't make shirts fast enough to keep up with the demand.

Instant publicity, instant credibility.

And yet, as that moment became the highlight of her career, it slowly became the hell of her career.

Because along with the accolades came the hate mail. Mountains of it. Complete strangers started coming from out of the woodwork to call this woman names and discredit her work and convince the world that her clothing was crap.

She was devastated.

And all she did was become successful.

But I'll never forget what my friend said as he reflected on that period of his wife's career. He posed an incredible moral question, one that lent a lot perspective to that experience:

Why is it that the moment you're touched by a hand, you're struck by a fist?

Ain't that the truth.

Humans, after all, are habit machines that tend to behave predictably. And one of the patterns they fall into is, not everybody wants you to be successful. In fact, a certain population of the world is just waiting around—excitedly—for you to fail, because they feel disenfranchised by your success.

Dennis Crowley, the founder of Foursquare, recently talked about his company's struggle with this very issue. He discovered that high expectations made everyone turn on him, famously saying, "People are in love with you, but then all of a sudden, they can't wait to watch you fail."

Of course, this isn't a new thing. The hand/fist phenomenon has been around for years.

Davy Jones, the late musician and former teen heartthrob, once did an interview about the British Invasion, in which he notoriously said, "As soon as you get successful, people want to kick you in the balls and throw you in the back yard and wait for you to make a mistake. They just want you to be famous and then go away."

Touched by a hand, struck by a fist.

Sheesh.

The good news is, jealousy isn't always a negative.

I read an interesting study from *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* called [Getting to the Heart of the Green Eyed Monster](#), in which mental health professionals explored the history, causes and implications of jealousy. Their research showed that jealousy was a fundamental aspect of human social life, and its absence was actually a sign of pathology. At the heart of the green eyed monster, they say, is the desire to feel good about the self, and any threat thereof can have negative consequences on our well being.

Makes sense.

In fact, I would even take it one step further.

Jealousy, isn't just normal—it's necessary.

The root word is *jalousie*, which translates to "enthusiasm and love and longing." Meaning, you have something I want, that upsets me, and now I'm motivated to work hard and get the same for myself, so thank you.

It's kind of like listening to Tom Waits.

The man's work is so brilliant and inspiring and unapologetic, that when I listen to his music, I literally become angry that I'm not as good as he is. To the point where I stop the song, go grab my guitar and songbook and try to improve my own work.

That's jealousy. And when channeled productively, can serve the world well.

Where we run into trouble is when *jealousy* morphs into *envy*.

The derivative for that word is *invidere*, which translates to “casting an evil eye.” Meaning, you have something I want, that diminishes me, and now I’m determined to knock you down to feel better about myself, so fuck you.

It’s kind of like web trolls.

When my first book went viral, I received an inordinate amount of hatemail. Turns out, many people were surprisingly angry at a guy who wore a nametag everyday. And they felt the need to publish awful things about me, my work and my ideas.

Naturally, I was devastated.

Touched by a hand, struck by a fist.

I’m just trying to make the world friendlier. Sheesh.

Fortunately, my web developer created a clever profanity filter for the guestbook on my website. He wrote code that replaced each of the web trolls’ curse words with softer phrases like *pretty pink roses* and *cute cuddly teddy bears*. Which, ironically, enraged them even more.

Anyway, that’s envy.

And unfortunately, the more success you have, the more likely people are to respond with that instead of jealousy. It’s just this weird cultural math that humans do. Almost like clockwork, as soon as someone becomes even a little bit successful, the green eyed monster whets its retributive appetite.

I was recently watching the fascinating documentary, *Downloaded*, written and produced by Alex Winter. This film addresses the evolution of digital media sharing on the internet. And it features exclusive interviews with software developers and musicians about controversial file sharing software, namely, Napster.

Totally inspiring, to say the least.

And although I took copious notes on the movie, there was a passage from one of the songwriters that resonated with me, especially around the idea of jealousy and envy:

“I just felt like this was one of the great moments in human history. But of course, great moments in human history usually have an opposition that is exactly proportional to their greatness.”

Touched by a hand, struck by a fist.

And so, there may be no fighting the green eyed monster. Seems like these emotions and feelings are fundamental to human social life, and they're here to stay.

What you can fight for, however, is the crucial choice to channel your jealousy into something productive, instead of crafting your envy into something hateful.

Because either way, you're burning calories.

Why not make them matter?

II. ROUTINE

33. PERIPHERAL CREATION VERSUS PRINCIPAL CREATION

Being prolific doesn't mean doing *everything* fast.

In my experience, when it comes to the principal act of writing, that is, physically putting words on a blank page, I actually work quite slowly. Which seems unlikely considering I've published two books per year, every year, for the last decade. But you have to understand; writing is only one step of the creative process.

It's *principal creation*. And that's something creators should never rush.

But there's also *peripheral* creation. Everything else in the creative process.

As a writer, for example, before showing up at the page, there's a mountain of researching and ritualizing and gathering inspiration and taking notes and organizing material to be done. Then, after showing up at the page, there's a second mountain of editing and formatting and architecting and managing and publishing and marketing to be done.

And those activities, I *do* execute quickly. Because they're secondary steps in the process. It's peripheral creation, where it's more about speed and less about skill, where velocity doesn't degrade value. And that something creators *should do* as quickly as possible.

Photographers know all about this distinction.

According to the landmark study by the International Society of Professional Wedding Photographers, after the *peripheral creation* of editing, designing, bookkeeping, going to meetings, communicating with clients, marketing, networking, equipment setup, technical maintenance and working in photo labs, only about twelve percent of the photographer's time is actually spent on *principal creation*, aka, clicking the shutter.

Twelve percent.

Shooting is their principal work unit.

Meanwhile, clients rarely understand just how much goes on behind the scenes. They assume wedding photographers only work one day a week. But the reality is, they wear a dozen business hats. They spend most of their time in front of a computer screen. And for every hour of principal shooting, photographers spend an additional six hours executing those peripheral activities. In fact, some photographers commented that weddings feel like their days off, since they finally get to relax and do what they love.

And so, no matter which medium you use to create, this bifurcation exists. Your work will always require a delicate balance of principal and peripheral creation. It's the price of admission for being a creator and communicator of ideas.

What counts as work these days?

Conceptualizing our next big idea, taking productivity seminars and going to the coffee shop to organize all of our material? *That's not work, that's hiding.*

Learning in public, doing book reports of other people's research and dissecting our creative process? *That's not work, that's studying.*

Telling strangers they're wrong for being who they are and prolifically sharing our thoughts about what other people are making? *That's not work, that's trolling.*

Basking in an echo chamber of adoration, playing inside baseball in a private hall of flattering mirrors? *That's not work, that's narcissism.*

Spending all afternoon perfecting our online profile, getting sucked into an ego vortex of google alerts and social media mentions? *That's not work, that's dopamine.*

Going back in time and reimagining, revising and relaunching something we made ten years ago? *That's not work, that's jacking off.*

The point is, all of these activities are wastes of creative energy. Addictions of the self. Spectator sports. Shadow careers devoid of blood and hunger and risk and daring and originality.

If we want to get on with the real work of making real art in the real world, we need to create something from whole cloth.

Something that's ours. Something that shows people how we see life.

Otherwise, what we are doing here?

I'm reminded of a compelling interview I heard with Josh Randor, the actor, director, producer, and screenwriter best known for his work on the award winning sitcom, *How I Met Your Mother*. When the interview addressed the topic of perseverance in the movie and television business, Josh's comment was that people don't quit acting because acting is tough, they quit because *not acting* is tough.

Meaning, our job as creators isn't just to solve the problem of creating, but to solve the problem is what to do when we're not creating. We have to build systems and disciplines and routines, both for *principal* creation and *peripheral* creation. Otherwise our time not creating will feel squandered and unproductive.

34. PRIMARY AND PORTABLE CREATIVE ENVIRONMENTS

I have a passion for personalized workspaces.

It all started when I was eight years old. My friend Jeremy invited me over for dinner. While we waited for his mom to finish cooking, he showed me around the house. The place was your typical, run of the mill, midwest two-story home. The kind of place you'd see in a John Hughes movie.

But the highlight of the tour was when we snuck into his older brother's room. And considering he was captain of the high school football team and pretty much the coolest guy in the neighborhood, crossing that threshold felt like trespassing on sacred ground.

And so, we opened the door, and that moment would be forever etched into my memory. Jeremy and I were instantly overwhelmed by his brother's floor to ceiling collage of *Sports Illustrated* magazine covers.

Complete sensory overload. Greatest thing I ever saw.

And the first thing I thought to myself was, "You can do that? You can, like, decorate your own personal space, however you want to?"

You better believe it.

That day, a light switched on inside my head that never turned off. I began my lifelong obsession with personalized workspaces. And although I didn't realize it at the time, I began building a system that would later become foundational in my creative life.

For the next three decades, I became fascinated with customizing, decorating and optimizing my personal space. From rooms to cars to desks to lockers to closets to studios to offices, I made it a point to make it my own. Through sight, sound, touch, smell and even energy, I made it a point to make it my own.

And what I learned was, you don't need science or a design background or feng shui expertise to build your ideal workspace. What matters is that you create a setting that reflects who you are and what's important to you, so that the ideas will flow as a natural consequence of that workspace.

I call this your *primary creative environment*.

Not an office. That's a dangerous word.

A few years ago, I did an interview on the topic of home office makeovers for a writer's magazine. The reporter asked about how to create a safe, creative and comfortable haven for your work, and how to maximize productivity based on personal environment.

I told them I didn't have an office. Instead, I said I have a place that's equal parts think tank, idea factory, laboratory, command center, studio, rehearsal space, playground, jungle gym and creative sanctuary.

It's an environment that's personalized, stimulating and makes me feel in control. It's my creative nirvana where utopia truly manifests itself. My surroundings help me stay in harmony with the small slice of the universe in which I find myself. The various personal patterns and physical objects, from music to visual stimulation to desk style, echo the rhythm of my thoughts and habits of action. The consistent surroundings become associative triggers that allow me enter into my creative zone. And that way, the moment I sit down to work, I can forget about the rest of the world and concentrate on courting the muse.

Your primary creative environment is the user interface for your brain and the essential structural asset for remaining prolific.

Steven Pressfield, screenwriter and bestselling author of historical fiction, has written extensively on creative environments. His theory is, art exists before it's created, and it's propelled into material being by its own imperative to be born, via the offices of those willing servants of discipline, imagination and inspiration, whom we call artists:

“Creators operate in a chaotic universe, and the object is to approach the mystery via order, commitment and passionate intention. And when we convene day after day in the same space at the same time, a powerful energy builds up around us. This is the energy of our intention, of our dedication and of our commitment.”

Proving, that the circumstance of creative activity, the place where we manufacture our ideas, is just as important to the process as the ideas themselves. In fact, I'm not the only person obsessed with personalized workspaces. Throw a rock and you'll hit a number of books, art exhibits, documentaries, web shows and photography collections that offer rare glimpses into the mysterious, private worlds of artistic work spaces. And what's fascinating is, all of these resources point to the same key principles. We quickly learn that the primary creative environment is a finely calibrated mechanism, tailor made to our obsessions, compulsions, preferences and idiosyncrasies.

Joseph Campbell aptly named this this space our *bliss station*. In his legendary public television miniseries on mythology, he said the following:

“A sacred place is an absolute necessity for anybody today. You must have a room, or a certain hour or so a day, where you don’t know what was in the newspapers that morning, you don’t know who your friends are, you don’t know what you owe anybody, you don’t know what anybody owes to you. This is a place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be. This is the place of creative incubation. At first you may find that nothing happens there. But if you have a sacred place and use it, something eventually will happen. Where is your bliss station? You have to try to find it. Get a phonograph and put on the music that you really love, even if it’s corny music that nobody else respects.”

Ultimately, by constructing this predictable environment, we enable the crucial sense of ease that frees our minds from squandering valuable attention on nonessential concerns, leaving us with nothing to do but work. Stability on one level opens creativity on another.

However, as any creator will tell you, inspiration comes unannounced. It operates on its own schedule, and you don’t always have access to your bliss station.

What’s an artist to do?

Build a *portable creative environment*.

I define this as any alternative workspace that functions as a transportable lightning rod, tailor made to your artistic tendencies, which enables you to snap into work mode and make the word flesh. Even if you’re sitting on the train, even if you only have a few minutes between meetings, even if there’s not a screen in sight, it gets the job done.

As a songwriter, I’m partial to the sound recorder on my phone. At night, I lay down excerpts of new songs I’m working on—a verse here, a chorus there—and then during the day, I sing to myself on the subway or during my lunch break. This keeps the rhythm, music and lyrics fresh in my mind, even if I can’t access my primary instrument, even if I’m miles away from my main songwriting station.

Hugh Macleod, cartoonist, entrepreneur and bestselling author, published a popular article about his portable studio. It’s a simple canvas bag with everything he uses to make his trademark cartoons on the back of business cards: Card holder, pens, ink, mints, an mp3 player with selected playlists, a sketchbook, xacto knife, cutting mat and plenty of blank paper.

Macleod treats his mini studio as his creative cornerstone. It's where the adventure starts, he says, and it's everything he needs to do what he does, wherever and whenever he finds himself.

That's his portable creative environment. What's yours?

Ultimately, whether it's a primary or a portable creative environment, the goal is the same, which is to cultivate the optimal conditions to make your creative process happen. To tighten up your systems so you release new levels of output and expression. And to establish trusted, consistent structures to trigger your creative focus.

Find out where you creativity feels at home, and then go there everyday.

35. MORE FULLY FLESH OUT YOUR WORK

Life is preaching to us all the time.

And as creators, people with hypersensitive relationships to the world, we have a responsibility to make the word become flesh. Because all we need is one idea, one thought, one image, one metaphor, one sentence, one poetic turn of a phrase, which we feel deep in their bones and can't wait to share with the world, and we'll make a meal out of that.

Carlin used to write comedy this way.

He'd begin with a single note, but over time, his notes would take on a life of their own. They'd start to find each other and become a family of ideas. And before he knew it, George would be sitting on sixty minutes of new material for his next standup special, all of which originated from that first note, that crucial moment of creative conception, that little piece of kindling that got the fire going.

And the best part about the process was, once the bonfire was blazing, nobody even remembered the piece of toilet paper that started it. That's how the creative process tends to work. The piece of creation radiates outward and multiples itself until perhaps the original note cannot be identified.

Edward DeBono, the godfather of creativity, has published a substantial amount of research on this process of fully fleshing out your work. He calls *movement value*, which is the creative habit of recognizing beginnings. The discipline of identifying concepts that allow you to breed other ideas from those concepts, spawning as many creative offspring as possible. The practice of finding the pivot point that alters the trajectory of your creative expression.

Debono's work found that the process of *making the word become flesh*, to use a biblical metaphor, can actually become a form of muscle memory. In the same way that a yogi's hips snap into the downward dog posture, the motor task of documenting meaningful things we notice can eventually become something we perform without conscious effort, allowing us to become more prolific than we ever thought possible.

It just takes practice.

We have to get good at noticing the moment of conception. That feeling when we say to ourselves, *hey wait, I think there's something there*. When we feel our head and heart begin to make their voice known, louder and louder, insisting that we give this moment attention, so we respond by thinking, oh man, something badly wants to be built here, something desperately wants to move from word to flesh, so we open our heart to what wants to be born, follow that vibe and see where it takes us.

That's movement value.

It helps you recognizing what you're handling.

I'm reminded of an interesting [interview](#) with Rob Bell, the renowned author, pastor and filmmaker. He was asked about the creative process of his first bestseller, *Velvet Elvis*, which launched his career as one of the great mass communicators of the last decade. Rob told this story about the driving force of his creative projects:

“There's usually some moment, like the moment of conception. There's a distinct aha and then quickly a number of other disparate things, that have nothing to do with it all of the sudden, have something to do with it. It's like, boom, and then story, story, story, story, quote, statistic, newspaper article, story, insight, truth. And now there are six things on that page, and I don't even know what they all have to do with each other. But I know they all have to do with that one fundamental insight. Everything just grows from there.”

That's our job as collectors, creators and communicators of ideas. Developing the habit of recognizing beginnings. Believing that every moment of conception has an engine, a spark, an energy source and a pulse that all the other ideas hum with and grow from and move around and work off of.

Moleskine is the iconic brand of notebook used by legendary artists, thinkers and literary avant gardes around the world for the past two centuries. In the past few decades, the brand has become synonymous with culture, travel and imagination, encompassing a family of nomadic objects like notebooks, diaries, journals, bags, writing instruments and reading accessories.

I recently stumbled into one of their retail stores and found a beautiful insight from Maria Sebreondi, their vice president of communications. In her essay about the creative moment of conception, she wrote the following:

“In a certain sense, every invention, every creation, every story, large or small, develops out of a map in which someone has intentionally become lost in a darkness where, at a certain point, something begins to glitter, to speak, to sing, to emit a sense, a flavor and a voice, and this groundwork leads to the design and actual piece of work through a complex and very personal cognitive process.”

And the invigorating part is, once we spot that moment of conception, the real discipline becomes harnessing its energy source to populate all of the implications and applications and situations and locations and motivations and concepts and patterns and stories and images and actions and insights and numbers and observations and decorations and declarations and invitations and questions and consequences, that are connected to it.

That’s when the creative process gets *really* interesting.

36. TURNING A SEED INTO A FOREST

The process of fully fleshing out your work hinges upon movement value.

It's the discipline of recognizing conceptual beginnings, witnessing ideas in their nascent state and thinking to ourselves, *hey wait, I think there's something here*, and then using that moment of conception to spawn as many creative offspring as possible.

Turning a seed into a forest, essentially.

This is the crucial process that separates the creatively blocked from the consistently prolific. It's the intersection of metaphorical thinking, memory jogging, strategic researching, creative stretching, structured brainstorming and rabbit hole venturing.

But once you hone this skill, once you master the art of movement value, not only will your creative output multiply, but the people in your life will start bringing their seeds to you, begging you to help build their forests.

Here's an example from my own life. Last night, the subway line by our house was shut down for maintenance. Naturally, we didn't realize that until *after* we'd walked ten blocks to the train station. And if you've ever lived in a big city without a car, you know how deflating that moment can feel.

By the time we figured out our alternate route, estimating that we would arrive hour late to our destination, my wife and I took one look at each other and said, *screw it, we don't care anymore, it's getting late, let's just order barbecue takeout and watch a movie.*

Stupid subway.

But on the walk back home, I pondered the experience and wondered if it pointed to a more general principle. Events, after all, are less about the events and more about being open to whatever is going on just below the surface. And I said to my wife, *wow, technology is, like, both the great enabler and the grating disabler.*

Hey wait, I think there's something there.

Here we go...

Domain transfer. *What else is like this?*

Internet access. When the cable goes out or your cell phone dies or your laptop runs out of battery power, you're screwed. Helpless. Completely idle. Just like we felt with the subway. Which is interesting, considering rapid transit **dates back** over a hundred and fifty years, while the internet only **dates back** only years. Perhaps the human dependency on any form of technology, be it transportation or digital communications, can be a dangerous vice.

Motion picture. *Did someone make a movie about this?*

Timed to correspond with Europe's Internet Week, advertising agency Mother London made a short documentary about a "disconnection experiment." What would happen if five digital natives were forced to go cold turkey for a week? The camera crew followed the participants throughout the week, documenting their experiences, both good and bad. Watch the full documentary called **No Internet Week**.

Case study. *Is there scientific research behind this?*

In a recent **study** published in the *Journal Computers in Human Behavior*, researchers investigated the dark side of the smartphone trend. The authors examined the link between psychological traits and the compulsive behaviors of smartphone users, and looked further into the stress caused by those compulsive behaviors. And sure enough, this study is only one of dozens that have been conducted.

News piece. *Has the media reported on this?*

I found an unbelievable **news story** about a young man who dropped his cell phone into the freezing cold Chicago river. He clambered over the railing in order to get it back and fell into the water. Then two friends jumped into the icy river after him. Long story short, the man who dropped the phone died in the hospital. And the friends who jumped in to save him were said to be in critical condition. Wow. Is technology really worth risking our lives?

Word study. *Are there any interesting definitions or etymologies?*

Technology is such a common word, idea and daily experience, that most people have never thought to look it up in the **dictionary**. Turns out, the word derives from two Latin terms, *techno*, which means "art or skill," and *legin*, which means "to speak." Interesting. And the definition of word can refer to the creation and use of technical means and their interrelation with life, society, and the environment. But it can also refer to the terminology and nomenclature of an art or science. Then again, technology can mean any scientific or industrial process, invention, method, or the like.

Internet meme. *Who else feels like this?*

Tumblr has tons of [blogs](#) talking about technology mishaps and addictions. I found posts that said, “My internet was down all day and I died several times ... When both the internet and cable signal are down, times are indeed dire ... If your subway is broken down, the taxi driver may be a horrible person who charges you a crap ton for each block.” And that’s just one social network.

The list goes on forever.

And depending on how much time you have, how fully you want to flesh out your idea out and many creative offspring you want your seed to produce, you might also consider the following categories:

Personal examples, memorable moments, public signs, song lyrics, movie lines, urban myths, scientific constructs, historical references, people you know, famous hypotheses, possible inventions, pop culture references, parallels in nature, poignant warnings, business personification, human absurdities, childhood memories , iconic images, classic jokes and common sayings.

And don’t forget universal human motivations, theoretical concepts, interesting patterns, personal stories, immediate actions people can take, powerful insights, noticeable numbers, objective observations, public declarations, inspiring invitations, powerful questions, palpable consequences, something you’re not okay with, something that offends your sense of order, practical implications, real world applications, possible related situations and geographic locations.

That’s movement value.

Turning a seed into a forest.

Starting on your small approximations and then being ready to travel the wider vistas they open for us.

And the exciting part is, it all started with that ground zero experience of a broken subway train, and thinking to myself *hey wait, I think there’s something here.*

37. TRICKING YOURSELF INTO DISCIPLINE

I've been having this ongoing argument with friend of mine.

She's a talented comedy writer, but also a terrible scatterbrain. And despite her best intentions to boost productivity, she finally threw up her hands and said:

"I just need a discipline transplant."

Which, ironically, is a pretty funny premise, and would make a great comedy bit, but I don't think she has the discipline to write it. Oh well.

Still, this is a topic I've been researching, publishing, lecturing and training on for many years. And what I've come to believe is, discipline is best approached when reframed as devotion.

Instead of finding time to do the work every day, you commit to making the work a permanent fixture in your daily life. That way, it just happens. Discipline becomes a non negotiable. A non thought. Instead of burning calories preparing to get ready to think about the possibility of potentially planning to do something, you just start. You invest all your physical and emotional and mental labor into the work itself, not in debating whether or not you should do it.

That's my theory. The only problem, most people aren't wired that way. Discipline might be interesting and meaningful and easy for some, but for the majority of the population, the pure, unromantic slog of sitting down every day and creating something, is painful.

And so, for people like my comedian friend, those who aren't skilled at doing things they don't want to do, I've developed a less threatening strategy:

You have to trick yourself.

When I started my publishing company right out of college, the best thing I ever did was impose a reverse curfew. I made a daily bargain with myself to be out of the house by seven o'clock, every morning. In part because I still lived with my parents, in part because I was hungry for recognition, but mainly because I wanted to trick myself into thinking I actually had a real job.

The first few days took some adjusting, but after about two weeks of holding this metaphorical gun to my head, I started to see how the micro accountability of a reverse curfew could net productive results.

First, by putting myself on this deadline, I never let the morning slip away. That ensured my days began with a cadence and rhythm that included movement. Second, the reverse curfew established a sense of place and a sequence of rituals. I went to the same coffee shop and ordered the same drink and sat in the same booth, every morning. Finally, the daily obligation of leaving the house contributed to my meaning quota, preventing the anxiety of inconsequentiality from crashing in. This enabled my ideal mental, emotional and existential space from which to create.

Interestingly, law enforcement officers have been using this tactic for years. I was recently reading an article about a guy whose bail condition included an electronic bracelet that enforced a reverse curfew. He was required, by law, to be out of the house during daytime hours, so he could focus on being a productive member of society.

Also, transitional housing programs use this measure with a variety of populations. Children aging out of foster care, inmates with upcoming release dates and homeless families are a few groups of people who use reverse curfews. Their lodging facilities impose strict schedules in which they're not even permitted *in* the house during the day, since they're expected to be out in the community, applying for jobs, attending classes or doing other productive activities.

That's how you trick yourself.

And so, reverse curfews work because they create ambient pressure. They force people to build internal and external constructs, with varying levels of severity and consequence and connection, all of which motivate them to stay disciplined.

Here's a slightly different example. Years ago, my mentor suggested I build a calendar feature into my website. He said it would be useful tool for motivating sales activity and creating the discipline of making daily sales call.

Understatement of the year. Turns out, the simple awareness of knowing that calendar was public facing painted me into an accountable corner, forced me to fill more dates and shamed me for not having enough work on the books. After all, as a freelancer, you fear the empty calendar. It's a visual reminder of inactivity and, often times, an indication of financial instability. And so, even though the calendar was only one innocuous page on my website, it still created the ambient pressure, the dangling sword of obligation, which motivated me to stir the pot and keep finding work.

It's how I used technology to trick myself.

But not all discipline strategies have to be as severe and explicit as reverse curfews, electronic bracelets and online calendars. Discipline is also something you can back into. I'm reminded of a mantra from one of my yoga instructors:

The shortest distance to the heart is through the body.

Meaning, if there's something you want to feel, if there's an emotional experience you want to work through, you can back into it by changing your sheer physicality.

Take vulnerability, for example. If you want to practice being seen as you truly are, allowing yourself to be affected by the world around you, *camel pose* is the perfect posture. Not only is it the deepest backbend of the hatha series, it's also only posture that fully exposes your throat, heart, belly and reproductive organs, all at the same time.

Doesn't get much more vulnerable than that.

I remember my first few months as a yogi. What I found was, the more I practiced, the more my body adapted. And after about a year, I finally bent my way to the full expression of camel pose. Interestingly, I also noticed greater vulnerability in other areas of my life. My openness to risk and uncertainty and emotional exposure dramatically increased. I also started crying in public a lot more.

Because as the body goes, so goes the heart and mind.

Think about it. Why do students who play sports in high school statistically achieve higher grades than non athletes? Because discipline breeds discipline. It's a classic domain transfer. The mindset and muscle memory from playing on the ball field transfers over to studying in the academic field.

Similarly, if you want to back into discipline, start by committing yourself to a completely different habit first. One that's small, easy, private, and if possible, physical. If only for the sole purpose of acclimating your body and mind to what discipline feels like. That way, once you slay that dragon, you can graduate to building discipline with more significant, public activities.

That's how you trick yourself.

The point is, we don't necessarily need more discipline, we need a more disciplined approach. If you're not the committed type, if you're not the kind of person to reframe discipline as devotion, all hope is not lost. You can still implement a few of these less threatening strategies to get creative work done. And perhaps you won't have to worry about getting on the national donor list for that discipline transplant after all.

38. INVITING NATURE AS YOUR CREATIVE COLLABORATOR

If we want to become more prolific, we have to create a more visceral and spontaneous contact with our work.

We have to invite nature as our creative collaborator.

Jackson Pollack famously laid his canvas on the floor of a converted barn instead of using the traditional easel. Back in the forties, he did an interview with an limited edition art publication called [Possibilities](#), in which he made the following statement:

“My painting does not come from the easel. I hardly ever stretch my canvas before painting. I prefer to tack the unstretched canvas to the hard wall or the floor. I need the resistance of a hard surface. On the floor, I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting, allowing the creation to take on a life of its own.”

By changing the way he approached his work, he put himself in a position, quite literally, to listen for what wanted to be created. By changing the perspective of the canvas in front of him, he changed the perspective of the ideas inside of him. By relieving his body of the necessity of gravity, he freed up his brain to float wherever its fancy led it. And by grounding himself physically, he grounded himself psychologically, engaging a posture of humility, appreciation and respect for his creative environment.

But what’s really interesting about his process is the science behind it.

[Physics Today](#) once published a fascinating article that analyzed the application of fluid dynamics in Pollock’s art. Their hypothesis was, to the degree that he let science take a role in the painting process, he invited physics to be a coauthor of his art pieces. And by creatively ceding some of the responsibility for the appearance of his work to a natural phenomena, he used fluid dynamics to contribute to the creation of an art object.

Pollock, of course, was no physicist. Had he been asked to explain the application of scientific concepts like hydrodynamic instability, surface tension, gravitational acceleration, axial velocity, inertial force, flow rate, liquid density, fluid stream, kinematic viscosity and coiling oscillations, Pollock’s head probably would have exploded. Instead, through trial and error, through pure chance and guided inquiry, he intuitively assimilated the implications of those scientific relationships into his work. And thanks to this process, he became a major figure in the abstract expressionist movement, inspiring an entire generation of painters.

The lesson, then, is to operate at the intersection of what is *aesthetically viable* and what is *physically possible*. To invite the collaboration of natural phenomena, forcing ourselves to think about art from a more scientific perspective.

I had my first experience with this practice a few years ago, when I started busking on the weekends under the historic Meadowport Arch, which is located at the entrance to Prospect Park. Over one hundred years old and one hundred feet long, this limestone tunnel has a unique double entrance onto the park's great lawn, giving the traveler a choice of which way to go in their journey.

It's quite breathtaking. The tunnel has benches built on both sides, a restored cedar sheathed ceiling and with paneling covering the entire surface, making it an iconic destination for daily joggers, curious tourists and frolicking children alike.

It also happens to have the best natural acoustics I've ever heard in my life.

And I've played everywhere.

Since I started performing music as a kid, I've been obsessed with singing songs in obscure venues, including apartment stairwells, old churches, long hallways, hotel bathrooms, even post office vestibules. These are the magical spaces where voices carry like bells and footsteps echo like gunshots, and frankly, it just seems wrong not to make music there. The spaces are aching for it. Like a match waiting for a spark.

And so, on most weekends, I play a concert in that tunnel by the park. My shows usually last about two hours, I sing all original songs, it's just me and the guitar, and I perform for anybody and everybody who walks past. By the time the show is over, I'll earn anywhere between ten and twenty dollars in change.

But the revelation was, since I started playing these shows, the tunnel helped me create a more visceral and spontaneous contact with my work. Turns out, the physical act of performing music in a naturally reverberated environment changes the biology of the songs. Notes, riffs, rhythms, melodies and lyrics, ones that might not have worked when I was just singing in my bedroom, magically started to make sense under the arch. By collaborating with the tunnel's scientific principles, I was able to do things I never thought I could do as a songwriter. It's like I finally let out a deep breath I had no idea I was holding.

The tunnel didn't just give me access to the park, it gave me access to myself.

The challenge, then, is for each of us to cede *some* of the artistic responsibility to an environmental phenomena. To invite nature, in any of its infinite forms, as the creative collaborator against which our work is hurled.

I'm reminded of famous study conducted by the [Carlson School of Management](#), which explored how ceiling height affected the way people think and act. Scientists tested how people processed information in different environments, and they found that a twenty foot ceiling helped them feel more free, enabling them to brainstorm more creatively and process more abstract connections between objects. For example:

Does your current project require you to discover innovative solutions to problems through divergent thinking? *Find a room with high ceilings*. Does your current project require you to bring thinking down to a more detailed and accurate level, focusing on specific tasks, details and tactical concerns? *Find a room with low ceilings*.

Ultimately, there is no force more honest, more reliable, more ubiquitous, and more scientifically proven than nature. It's not supernatural, it's just natural. And as creators and communicators of ideas, as people with an inherent need to connect with something bigger than ourselves, we ought to design systems and structures that invite nature as our collaborator.

Because it's hard to be creative alone.

It's like playing basketball without a backboard.

39. SENDING YOUR CREATIVE ROCKET INTO THE SKY

We've already explored how to get your body of work onto the runway with the help of gravitational order. *That's one kind of momentum.*

We've also talked about treating your work as a daily practice and professionalizing your creative process through commitment. *That's another kind of momentum.*

Next, we're going to approach momentum from a project based level, looking at strategies to make it a powerful driving force for your work.

I was recently reading an interview in *The Paris Review* with Robert Crumb, the cartoonist who helped spawn the indie print culture of zines, graphic novels and comics, and he described his process in the following way:

"Getting started is like getting a rocket off the ground. You need the most energy and the most push to get moving, but once you're up there and you're going, then it's easier to keep it going."

Most creators have felt this way at some point. And the question has always been, exactly how *do* you get the rocket of the ground? Well, as someone who's started a lot of things in his career, I'm happy to report that you don't need to have everything figured out, you just have to put energy toward it. Something, anything, that initiates the launch sequence, immediately plunges you into action and builds momentum.

Eric Maisel, the world's foremost creativity and meaning making coach, suggests that we choose projects and obsessions with the potential to galvanize us. Productively obsessing over ideas generates internal pressure that vexes and consumes us in a healthy way, he says. In the book *Brainstorm*, his case studies show that when we really bite into a mental task, we generate a demand. This demand amounts to real pressure, as real as any pressure a human can generate, and that builds momentum, turning our idea into some appropriate reality.

I struggled with this a few months ago when I found myself stuck in *creative limbo*. If you've never been there before, it's a bizarre existential space. Not a block, per se, but more of a nervous disquiet. A lack of excitement around not having discovered something worth doing. A knowledge that you're on the verge of a fiery new artistic pursuit, but an inability to turn yourself over to some pressing, meaningful creative demand.

In short, the opposite of momentum.

During my period of creative limbo, however, I had lunch with a professor friend of mine, and to my surprise, that became the conversation that galvanized me. Jim was telling me how he landed his job as an instructor at the university. Great story. Turns out, a serendipitous encounter with one of the department heads led to a phone call, which led to a meeting, which led to an interesting opportunity for Jim to develop new curriculum for the business school.

And I remember thinking to myself, *developing curriculum, now there's an interesting project. There's something that might be worth obsessing over.*

By the time I returned home from lunch, the launch sequence had initiated. I literally felt the momentum accumulating inside of me as I bit into the mental task of creating curriculum. For what and for whom, I wasn't sure yet. But it didn't matter, because that lunch meeting snapped me out my creative limbo and generated the internal demand I needed to move forward.

Since that fateful day, I've been on fire creatively. Not because I had the idea figured out, but because I put energy toward it.

That's momentum.

Now, on a more tangible scale, it's also possible to activate momentum through some kind of physical object. Tom Kelly, founder of the largest innovation firm in the world, wrote a fascinating book about the beginning of the creative process. His theory is, it's all about prototyping. Prototyping allows people to make progress before they know what progress looked like. What counts, he says, is never wasting time, moving the ball forward, opening new possibilities of discovery and achieving some part of your goal, albeit a small one.

Interestingly, the word *prototype* comes from the Latin term *prototypus*, which translates to, "first impression or original form." Meaning, building momentum doesn't always require something as complex and detailed as an actual rocket, it just has to add energy to the system.

You *might* say that what momentum needs, is a moment.

Whenever I finish the first draft of a new writing project, like the aforementioned curriculum, for example, my favorite ritual is to print out a hard copy of the document and organize it into a beautiful leather binder. That's my moment. That's my prototype for moving the ball forward.

Since I've been loyal to this process for over a decade, I've found the experience of watching a printer spit out three hundred pages of creative work that I've personally labored over, holding those hot little babies in my hands and then inhaling the sweet smell of satisfaction, to be one of the great joys of being a writer.

It's the birth of a creative brainchild. It's finally here. And in that instant, I don't care if the work is good, I don't care if it sells, I don't even care if people like it, because it's my moment and nobody can take it away from me.

And on a practical level, the binder also works as a multifunctional device:

First, as a *cognitive device*, the binder tricks my brain into thinking that I have my act together, even when I have no idea where the project is going.

Second, as a *commitment device*, the binder makes the effects of my work real and visible for all to see, even in the early stages of production.

Third, as a *confidence device*, the binder creates a visual record of progress that gives me a psychological pat on the back and saturates my consciousness with victory.

Fourth, as a *capturing device*, the binder memorializes the process of writing my ideas down, making them more real and imprinting them deeply in my psyche.

Fifth, as a *competence device*, the binder leverages the tangibility of manual labor to instill a sense of agency and a context of sufficiency.

All of which build momentum.

The binder is the moment that adds energy to the system. It moves the story forward. In a way, it almost gives me an elegant excuse just to have ideas and validate the process with a sophisticated piece of office technology.

In the aforementioned book, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, the author explains that a kind of spiritedness is called forth when we take things in hand for ourselves, and that getting an adequate grasp on the world intellectually depends on getting a handle on it in a literal and active sense. Producing material things, he writes, accumulates a sense of psychic nourishment and creates a communion with the future.

I couldn't agree more.

And admittedly, I'm just a writer who prints out sheets of paper and organizes them into a binder. That's certainly not the same as a sweaty tradesman building tractor parts in a welding shop. But while I may not be laboring in the traditional sense, the binder sure beats pushing pixels all day. And you can only get so far staring at a screen. The resolution of the paper page is much higher.

What matters, is that the binder builds momentum.

It gives my mental obsession a physical expression.

And so, whatever ritual or process or prototype you use to get the ball rolling on your work—mental or physical—remember that it's not about getting everything right, it's about getting something moving in the right direction.

Because you don't need an idea, you need an "*I did.*"

Put energy toward your idea.

Initiate the launch sequence and send your creative rocket into the sky.

40. PUT YOUR BODY INTO THEIR MEMORIES

Anything worth doing is worth doing for a long time.

Because eventually, you'll start to run into people who have heard of you. Or remember one of your works. Or talked to their friends about you. Or saw you perform somewhere. Or listened to you do an interview. Or read something you wrote. Or did a case study on you in one of their marketing or psychology or communication classes.

Proving, the shortest distance to someone's brain is through your body.

Your body of work, that is.

Julia Cameron, artist, poet, playwright, novelist, filmmaker, and composer, has accumulated an astounding body of work in the last thirty years. Her insights have had a profound influence on my creative life, from my tactical daily routines to my strategic career decisions. In her book *The Sound of Paper*, she paints a powerful picture about the importance of longevity:

“Creators must take the long view and be in it for the long haul. The ability to see distance is critical to a creative career, because we’re out to accomplish a body of work, not merely one piece. And so, making great strides in creativity means taking small steps. We must always bear in mind that each day’s work is part of a larger body of work, and that slow, steady output amasses into a work of a lifetime. But unless we are able to take this long view, we will be derailed by rejection.”

The goal, then, is to leave behind an easily found trail of accomplishment. And not just any creative output, but work that's worth collating and highlighting.

Here's what that means:

Putting yourself into as many mediums and channels and expressions as possible, so that over time, the total output of your work becomes a collection that people can access in many different ways.

Standing for something faithfully, so that you become a living embodiment of that thing, almost like a placeholder, bookmark, beacon or a reminder, which allows people to start equating you with the thing itself.

Staying with yourself as the world orbits around you, knowing that no matter how long it takes before people come back into your atmosphere, they'll still find you doing what you do, even if you're doing it in new ways.

Generating as many potential brand touches as possible, so the universe of people you've interacted with grows naturally and incrementally until eventually, the right group of people finds you.

Getting up in the morning, listening to what you're supposed to make next and shoveling coal into your creative locomotive, laying down track as fast as you can, without the fear that your best ideas are behind you.

Establishing themes in your work so your art is less random and more of a representation of your feelings and ideas and sense of life, like a physical index of your human value system.

That's how your body of work, which is everything you create and contribute and affect and impact, will earn its way into people's memories. To get there, here's the formula:

Small times long equals big.

That's my equation for prolificacy. Proving, that we just have to learn to be incrementalists. To make our art like a mosaic, adding one small piece at a time.

For example, the writing formula I've been using for years was five hundred words a day, five days a week, fifty weeks a year. Now, for most professional writers, that isn't that many words. And yet, the number nets out to about three books a year. All from one page a day. That's not mystery, that's not mastery. That's just math. And yet, few artists have hooked into this way of working. They haven't committed to a critical number of creative output. They don't realize that building a body of work boils down to those everyday disciplines that contribute to the sheer accumulation of material.

Small times long equals big.

Seinfeld understands this formula. As a comedian and writer, he has an estimated net worth of eight hundred million dollars. And so, it's no surprise that he famously said that the way to be a better comic was to create better jokes, and the way to create better jokes was to write every day. He suggested getting a big wall calendar that has a whole year on one page and hanging it on a prominent wall. And for each day that you hit your quota, you get to put a big red x over that day. Then, after a few days you'll have a chain. And if you just keep at it, the chain will grow longer every day. You'll like seeing

that chain as a visual reminder of progress, especially when you get a few weeks under your belt. And at that point, your only job is to not break the chain.

Small times long equals big.

Schultz understood this formula. In his biography, he famously said cartooning was a job where you're doing the same thing over and over, but you're never allowed to repeat yourself. And yet, he explained that the secret of his success was focusing on drawing one good comic strip every day. Not making millions. Not achieving fame. Not changing the world. Not advancing his personal agenda. Not making publishers and newspapers happy. Just the art. Just the work. Just one good strip, every day. That single goal, that incrementalist approach, governed Schultz's work for more than fifty years, and it made him the most influential, popular and profitable cartoonist in the history of the medium. The strip was his mission piece. That one chunk of art he committed to, focused on and obsessed over, each day, until it was done, no exceptions; trusting that everything else, from the television specials to the merchandising to the books, would flow from that.

Small times long equals big.

Rodney Crowell mastered this formula. He's a singer and songwriter whose chart topping country tunes have earned him multiple awards, nominations and collaborations with a variety of famous musicians. His theory is, inspiration is earned. You've got to develop a work ethic. And that if inspiration *isn't* there, you go back working with a shovel and a rake, trying to make yourself worthy. In his interview with *American Songwriter*, he said the blessing of being an artist is working at it every day, and going to work every day. And if you're lucky enough to spend a lifetime as a working artist, he says, the work, the day in and day out rhythm of the work, becomes the most important thing about it. And it just leads to clarity and a deeper focus.

Small times long equals big.

Proving, that consistency is the ultimate shortcut. That the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. That small times long equals big. And as a result, he forever put his body into our memories.

And so, whatever you're creating, don't just do it well, do it for a long time.

III. STRATEGY

41. IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME

Time is the great thickener of things.

When it comes to your art, time is the strongest agent for making your work robust enough to find its audience and make a difference. More than talent, more than connections, more than money, more than anything, time is the invisible hand that always has your back.

Because no matter how many romantic stories you hear about innovators and artists and computer geniuses who found success early and often, the reality is, that's rarely the case.

Colonial Sanders didn't come up with his secret recipe until he was fifty. Momofuku didn't create instant ramen until he was sixty. Roget didn't invent the thesaurus until he was seventy. Darwin didn't publish his theory of evolution until he was fifty. Dostoyevsky didn't write his greatest novel until he was sixty.

And those guys were in the top one percent of one percent.

For us normies, it will probably be a long time before what we do catches on.

But in the interim, we can hustle while we wait. And we can respect and leverage time in several strategic ways:

From a *mindset* perspective, we believe there is something waiting for us and trust our ability to sit down and respond to something.

From a *mundane* perspective, we fall in love with the unsexy reality of our work, achieving greatness by doing what is repetitive and dull.

From a *movement* perspective, it's about finding ways to stay in the game so you can outlive the critics and still be around when the world is ready for you.

From a *momentum* perspective, we build an undeniable body of work that grows stronger, brick by brick, and know that we're better because it took longer.

From a *moxie* perspective, we keep our hand raised until it's our turn, and then say yes when luck finds us.

From a *motivation* perspective, we chase inspiration until it gets winded enough for us to catch it, and don't let it leave until we pick its pocket.

And the good news is, when we combine the mindset, the mundane, the movement, the momentum, the moxie and the motivation, whatever art we feel called to create, whatever dreams we feel compelled to follow, and whatever change we feel commissioned to make, one thing's for sure.

It's only a matter of time.

Society know it. That's why the graduates go into finance and stay there, while the great unwashed star in reality television programs, get famous for a few years, then slide back into obscurity when the trade on their fame has lost most of its zeros. We know their names, but they're footnotes, trivia questions, if you think they're rich, you don't know what rich is. Life is long. If you're not prepared for delayed gratification, you're going to have a very rough ride."

The point is, it's not about college, it's about continuity. Staying the course. Delaying gratification. Risking today's time for tomorrow's treasure. Believing that it's only a matter of time. And know that those who practice patience, become prolific.

42. PROLIFICACY HINGES ON THE POWER OF ONE.

I have a friend who's a perfectionist.

She would rather show nothing than show work that's less than her best.

And I tell her all the time, look, I understand you want to put your best foot forward, but you'll never impress anyone by putting *no foot* forward. Quality will come in time. In the early stages of your journey as a creator, what matters is having something, anything, that you can point to. Something you can hold up and say, *this is me, this is what I do*.

Even if it's not a ten.

Before she was the creator of the wildly hit show *Girls*, Lena Dunham made her first feature film, *Tiny Furniture*. The movie was created on a shoestring budget with mostly friends and family members, shot in Dunham's own apartment. And while some critics said the film lacked substance and that the characters were unlikeable, the movie still won an award at a major film festival, launching her career as a writer, actor, director, filmmaker, author and activist.

But here's the part of the story most people don't know.

During recent radio interview, Dunham explain that the significance of that first film was, *it got her on the runway*. It gave her momentum. It paved the way for prolificacy. And once she started booking meetings with producers and networks that could say yes to her, she had something to do the talking for her.

Prolificacy, then, hinges on the power of one. Sometimes you have to put work out there that's less than amazing *today*, to motivate yourself to make something even better *tomorrow*. Otherwise the curse of perfection trumps the commitment to progress.

In fact, there's actually some science behind it.

A friend of mine who teaches quantum physics says that motion organizes and creates order. In his research, he found that through motion, all things tend to their equilibrium and find their place in the universe, thus conspiring towards some unifying geometrical situation.

He calls it the theory of gravitational order.

Which may sound odd and nerdy and esoteric, but it's actually a helpful reminder that life rewards action. And that it's not about getting things right, it's about getting things moving in the right direction.

For example, my first book wasn't exactly a literary masterpiece. Clocking in at just under a hundred pages, and considering the number of typos and adverbs poor grammar and rambling stories, I can't even bring myself to flip through it anymore. It's just too painful. And yet, that book got me on the runway. It launched my career, built my brand and changed my life forever.

Because prolificacy hinges on the power of one.

In fact, history is rife with examples of famous creators and artists whose first projects got them on the runway:

The movie *From Dusk Till Dawn* wasn't huge at the box office, but it launched George Clooney's career as a movie star. Since then, he's received over one hundred nominations and won more than fifty awards as an actor, writer and director.

The song *Oh Susanna* didn't earn Stephen Foster much money, but it launched his career as a musician and composer who wrote hundreds of songs and earned multiple spots in songwriting halls of fame.

The book, *And to Think that I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, was never as popular as any of Dr. Seuss's later works, but it launched his career as the most beloved and prolific cartoonist and children's author of all time.

In the classic slasher film *Halloween*, actress Jamie Lee Curtis was only paid eight thousand dollars for her performance, but it launched her career as a scream queen and allowed her to compile a body of work that spanned many genres.

The band *Black Flag* once allowed superfan Henry Rollins to perform on stage with them, and that impromptu audition launched his career as a musician, writer, journalist, publisher, actor, radio host, spoken word artist and activist.

The soundtrack *When Harry Met Sally* included mostly jazz standards, but it allowed Harry Connick Jr. to further expand his career as a musician to the national stage, ultimately selling twenty eight million albums worldwide.

The movie *In Old Santa Fe* featured Gene Autry, who only sang on screen for ten minutes, but it launched his career as a singing cowboy on the radio, in movies, and on television for more than three decades.

If you want to get on the runway, prolificacy hinges on the power of one.

What will you kick out into the world to activate gravitational order?

43. DECIDE THAT YOU'RE NEVER FINISHED

The biggest barrier to starting is finishing.

That's why so many artists die with their music still in them. They're too busy twisting themselves into psychological pretzels, paralyzed by the wrong questions:

When I'm done writing this script, then what? What if nobody likes it? What if the final product isn't good enough? What if my work gets criticized and compared to everybody else? Or, what if my audience actually embraces it? Then what? Does that mean I'll have to go out there and actually start selling the damn thing?

No wonder people never start. They're too afraid to finish.

Psychologically, this makes total sense. Humans have a natural aversion to completion. We don't like when things end. Endings represent loss and change and death and dying and saying goodbye and starting over.

But, as I learned from watching way too many karate movies in the eighties, the best way to block a punch is to not be there. Which leads to a different question. One that most creators never think to ask:

How can I eliminate the construct of "finishing" from my creative equation?

Simple. By deciding that my work is never finished.

This proclamation gives me the freedom to approach my creative process as a fluid experience. Viewing each piece of output as a constantly evolving organism, within the ecosystem of my larger body of work. As a result, everything I create is assigned its appropriate home on the artistic continuum. I allow myself the freedom to change as I discover the next form of myself, never limited to one vision of my capabilities. And I begin developing an artistic voice that populates my whole personality. That way, with no visible end in sight, the specter of completion never stifles me from starting.

Because there is no finish line.

In fact, if you read the obituaries of successful creators, you'll notice an interesting pattern in the way friends and family members describe their legacy.

One obituary I read was about a woman named Hong, who had authored more than thirty books, many of which were bestsellers. When she reflected on the arc of her career, she said that the whole body of work just felt like one long book.

One obituary I read was about a man named John, an award winning abstract painter, whose tapestries appeared in both private and corporate collections around the world, and whose tribute said his body of work was one long hymn of spiritual affirmation.

One obituary I read was about a man named Tagore, a social reformer, singer, painter, and international spokesperson, whose life's work was thought to be one long prayer for human dignity, world peace, and the cultural understanding.

For prolific creators, there is no finish line. Our body of work is the sum total of everything we create and contribute and affect and impact.

We're done when we're dead.

I'm reminded of a memorable **scene** in one of my favorite movies, *The Social Network*, which portrays the founders of Facebook, their struggle as a tech startup the resulting lawsuits. In a heated argument about the future of their revolutionary website, Zuckerberg says to his partner:

"We don't even know what it is yet. We don't know what it is, we don't know what it can be, we don't know what it will be. All we know that it's cool, and that's a priceless asset I'm not giving it up. When will it be finished? It won't be finished, that's the point. The way fashion's never finished. I'm talking about the idea of it, and I'm saying it's never finished."

Mark removed the construct of finishing from his creative process. The specter of completion never stifled him from starting. And that allowed him to become not only a prolific software designer and entrepreneur, but also one of the wealthiest and most influential people in the world.

And so, once we come to that realization, we'll never create the same way again. By removing that sword of obligation from hanging over our heads, we relieve the pressure of perfection and accomplishment. And we learn to trust the process of creating, *not just what the creating produces*, so we can blow the ceiling off anything resembling a limitation.

You're never finished.

Why not start?

THE PROLIFIC GLOSSARY

A LEXICON FOR REWRITING YOUR CREATIVE VOCABULARY

A key component to becoming prolific is learning and employing a robust vocabulary of creativity. It's a language that permits you to communicate with yourself and others about the creative process, helps you make sense of the otherwise ambiguous world of creativity, empowers you to speak a language that supports your intentions, and allows you to conceptualize and describe your experience of creating.

And so, my hope for you is to build a lexicon of words and phrases that allow you to converse about creativity. You'll find that building a working vocabulary of what it means to be prolific, you'll significantly better your chances of managing the creative process.

Each of the following phrases is indexed with multiple reference points including articles and other external resources from this book, allowing you to integrate as many or as few of them as you wish.

1. **Active listening.** Tuning into the muse and the situation and the gleams of light that flash across your mind, trusting what the world is trying to tell you.
2. **Accidental preparation.** The hardcore formative time that fosters dreams, acts as creative training and lays groundwork for the years to follow.
3. **Aggressive pondering.** Deliberately creating a situation or framed experience in order to have an arena in which to work out an unresolved issue.
4. **Arbitrary sorting mechanism.** An organizing principal, free of judgment and expectation, which allows you to notice patterns in your ideas and inspiration.
5. **Artist debt.** Periods when we become disconnected from our primary creative joy and fail to achieve our quota of artistic usefulness
6. **Artistic withdrawal.** The physiological readjustment required after we've been addictively working on a creative project for a while.

7. **Associative trigger.** Personal patterns and physical objects, from music to visual stimulation to **desk style**, that echoes the habits of action and allow you to enter into your creative zone.
8. **Awareness plan.** A **metacognitive** procedure or mental recipe for perceiving and thinking about the environment around you, a lens for interacting with the world.
9. **Bacon.** A motivational **currency** that overrides your excuses, activates your natural inclinations and moves you to execution.
10. **Boundary moments.** Existential **distresses** or identity crises in which our motivation for doing something is just to feel normal again.
11. **Bridging.** The art of making connections and noticing natural relationships between seemingly unrelated ideas.
12. **Centering sequence.** A daily ritual that brings your brain up to operating temperature in order to run properly.
13. **Centerprise.** A tool that enlists unique aspects of your authentic personality to enhance your ability to sell, making the commerce component of art easier to swallow.
14. **Cognitive richness.** The sense of agency and competence you experience during the process of manual or **analog** work.
15. **Compound interest.** The capacity to generate more and more value over time through slow, unsexy, but consistent creative increments.
16. **Catchall.** The central lever that galvanizes the whole machine, the crucial stone that kills all of the birds and the single activity that can be trusted to take care of everything else.
17. **Clearinghouse.** A destination where you can unite all of her interesting elements, intermingling your interests and themes into a meaningful, cohesive whole.
18. **Commitment device.** A physical object or **prototype** that makes the effects of your work real and visible for all to see, even in the early stages of production.

19. **Constant.** Muscles to count on, places to return to, **rituals** to abide by, people to confide in, rocks to anchor to, practices to rely on, structures to lean against, that keep your creative life stable and fruitful.
20. **Containment.** The balance between safeguarding your artistic vision to protect intellectual property and passionately sharing your ideas with the world.
21. **Content detachment.** The creator's obligation to **empty** himself of any expectations, perceptions, hierarchies and value chains attached to his ideas.
22. **Creation selling.** When the artist, whose inventory is as vast and varied as their imagination allows it to be, leverages the process of creation to expedite the practice of selling.
23. **Creative commitment.** A theoretical constraint of treating your art as a daily practice, professionalizing your art and using daily momentum to keep yourself from feeling detached from the process.
24. **Creative expectation.** An attitude that improves an artist's ability to spot their next opportunities when it materializes.
25. **Creative kindling.** A source of inspiration that **reignites** your original enthusiasm and the impulse that initially fueled your artistic energy reserve.
26. **Creative limbo.** A lack of excitement around not having discovering something worth doing, an inability to turn yourself over to a new creative project.
27. **Creative on ramp.** A ritual that prompts a **work mindset**, a moment that merges you into the creative process, an environment that sets a tone that says *work happens here*.
28. **Creative subroutine.** Using a **ritual** that brings up your energy and snaps you into the appropriate state of mind to do your work.
29. **Creative uniform.** A wearable identity totem that prompts a work mindset and sets a tone that says to your brain, work happens now.
30. **Deep democracy.** Treat everything we **encounter** with fundamental affirmation and radical acceptance.

31. **Digging your creative well.** Accumulating ongoing **reference** files for your brain to work on through a passive, unconscious process.
32. **Discipline transplant.** Doable, less threatening **strategies** to enable your ideal mental, emotional and existential space from which to create.
33. **Distributed cognition.** New ideas that arise from combining many **disparate** pieces of information or concepts over an extended period of time.
34. **Distribution.** Anybody or anything who has influence on someone who can buy your work.
35. **Domain transferring.** Bringing ideas from one field of knowledge into another by asking, *what else is like this?*
36. **Early warning system.** A personal seismograph that helps us take preemptive action against impending inner turmoil and anxiety.
37. **Ember of initiative.** Instead of taking things personally, you channel them productively, using emotion as **oxygen** for your creative fire.
38. **Exhaling.** The creative season of expression, or **output**, meaning shipping work out of the factory.
39. **Existential anchor.** Portable, purposeful and private **sanctuary** that brings you back to center to reconnect with the self, the body, the spirit and the heart.
40. **Faithful forces.** **Routines** that keep your creative life stable and fruitful when circumstances get a little too overwhelming.
41. **Fertile idleness.** Hustling while you wait and leveraging downtime into something creative, productive and meaningful.
42. **Firing blanks.** A period of work in which you're running on fumes, soaring past point of diminishing returns and need to reload the creative chamber.
43. **Fragmentary associative process.** Creating ideas in a **piecemeal**, nonlinear fashion, without the constraints of chronology, sequence, rational order and narrative.

44. **Going perpendicular.** Intentionally walking away from your current work to engage in something unrelated to the flow of activity.
45. **Good low.** When life hands us a pile of shit, we strategically convert that experience into creative resources of energy, fertility and happiness.
46. **Gradualistic creativity.** Rejecting the notion of the elusive eureka moment and practicing an existential and holistic approach to a creative life, living your life in a way that your art gets done over and over.
47. **Gravitational order.** Using motion to create equilibrium so your work finds its place in the universe, thus conspiring towards some unifying geometrical situation.
48. **Ground zero.** The entry point into the creative processing workflow, the primary location for offloading raw materials into your idea factory, the central cockpit of creative control.
49. **Homebase.** A place or community where you can commune your fellow artists and lock into the historical, societal and institutional frameworks of your creative world.
50. **Hyperfocused expression.** The little world you investigate to a great, high level, something that fascinates and ignites you.
51. **Identity based creation.** Tapping into your native endowments and limitations of creativity, motivation, inspiration and intelligence and channeling them in the service of making your ideas happen.
52. **Incrementalism.** Building a body of work based on a practice of patience, delayed gratification and continuity.
53. **Industrious revolution.** The initial calorie burning experience of unpleasant and inconspicuous production that fortifies an artist's appreciation delayed gratification.
54. **Inhaling.** The creative season of inspiration, or input, meaning listening for what wants to be written.
55. **Inspiration framework.** Metacognitive, ritualistic or recreational tactics for finding inspiration where no one else is looking.

56. **Integration.** Employing the whole of your personality, talents, gifts and experiences to contribute the highest amount of value and firepower those around you.
57. **Internal revolution.** Updating the identity story you tell yourself after spontaneously doing something you didn't realize you could do.
58. **Intrinsic triggers.** A unique set of inputs that stoke your creative fire. Little moments that let you clothespin a piece of stimuli onto your psyche for further evaluation.
59. **Limitation leverage.** Identifying your deficiency, deciding how to exploit it and then restructuring everything in the creative process around it.
60. **Making room.** Relieving your brain the necessity of remembering, freeing up your working memory to opens your mind to receive new ideas.
61. **Meaning context.** Making motivation significantly easier by reframing an activity as being existentially painful not to do.
62. **Medium agnostic.** Instead of forcing our own expectations upon the work, you allow patterns to emerge and open our work to becoming more dimensionalized, in whatever form it needs to live.
63. **Mini sabbatical.** The opposite of ambition, the antitheses of labor, in which you leave the creative land alone for a given period of time.
64. **Moment of conception.** The single spark of life that signals an idea's movement value, almost screaming to you, something wants to be built here.
65. **Momentum device.** An elegant excuse just to have ideas and validate the process with a sophisticated piece of office technology, building your confidence, commitment and competence.
66. **Movement value.** The discipline of recognizing conceptual beginnings, witnessing ideas in their nascent state and fully fleshing out your work.
67. **Natural collaboration.** Creating a more visceral and spontaneous contact with your work by designing systems and structures that invite nature as your collaborator.

68. **Neighbor.** Something that already exists the audience's head that becomes a mental hook upon which you can hang future ideas.
69. **Operational farsightedness.** Due to our utter dedication to wider market demands, we fail to note the needs of our intimate ecosystem.
70. **Opportunity agenda.** A form of second order imagination, it's the inherent enterprise to notice creative opportunities, apply force and propel them into interesting directions.
71. **Organizing principle.** The core **assumption**, central reference point or guiding pole, which governs action and allows everything else in its proximity to derive value.
72. **Paper thinking.** Experiencing your ideas kinesthetically by writing down whatever is rising up from within your depths, saving judgment for later.
73. **Pause buttons.** A personal, portable toolbox of strategies for reducing the experience of anxiety on a moment's notice.
74. **Pausing.** The creative season of intermission, or **throughput**, meaning managing your ideas as an inventory system.
75. **Peripheral creation.** The **secondary** activities of your creative process that involve more speed and less skill, i.e., editing and formatting or networking and billing.
76. **Permission.** The mental construct of notenoughness that prevents, delays or derails the progress of your creative work.
77. **Permissionless platform.** An honest canvas where you can be completely free, expressing whatever you want, as loud you want, as much as you want, in the way that you want.
78. **Physical displacement.** A problem solving technique whereby working in unusual **settings** helps you see patterns you wouldn't have noticed otherwise.
79. **Placeholder.** A surrogate piece of content that helps budget time and keep production going until a better idea comes along.

80. **Polyamorous creation.** Pursuing relationships with multiple creative projects, with a full knowledge and consent of all partners involved.
81. **Portable creative environments.** Any alternative workspace that functions as a transportable lightning rod, tailor made to your artistic tendencies, which enables you to snap into work mode and make the word flesh.
82. **Proxy.** A contextual prototype that does a lot of the strategic heavy lifting before you open your mouth.
83. **Positive tension.** Painting yourself into an accountable corner through eustress, which forces you to reckon with the infallible judgment of reality.
84. **Preliminary trigger.** A simple, easy and incremental tool that activates the creative process and grows your executional victory bank.
85. **Premature cognitive commitment.** When people become emotionally or intellectually bound to a course of action, a form of mindlessness that results after a single exposure to an idea.
86. **Primary creative environments.** The essential environment asset that reflects who you are and what's important to you, so that the ideas flow as a natural consequence of that workspace.
87. **Principal creation.** The primary work unit of your creative process that requires focus and craft, i.e., putting words on paper or clicking the shutter.
88. **Proactive unconscious.** Viewing your mind as idea processor, waiting at your beck and call, begging you to assign it a problem so it can immediately go to work for you.
89. **Productive selfishness.** Scratching your own itches, making the art you want to see in the world and channeling creative selfishness in a direction that benefits civilization.
90. **Progress rich environment.** Surrounding yourself with concrete evidence of progress to emotionally invigorate yourself and make you more inclined to take further action.

91. **Prolificacy equation.** An **incrementalist**, easy does it approach to creating a body of work, which is everything you create and contribute and affect and impact.
92. **Promiscuity.** Providing multiple entry points for your audience through a continuous, voluminous level of output.
93. **Prototype.** Something that gives your mental obsession a **physical expression**, a physical thing that adds energy to the system, moves the creative ball forward and gives the creator the psychological pat on the back.
94. **Reverse providence.** Helpless situations where the world seems to be orchestrating the ideal conditions to prevent you from reaching your goal, creating a web of incidents and meetings and material assistance whose sole purpose in life is hold you back.
95. **Ritual of leave taking.** Microstructures that celebrate the completion of a period of work, slow down the creative process and set healthy boundaries to demarcate the line between work and nonwork.
96. **Ritualized vomiting.** A daily ritual of emotional release where you **metabolize** your experiences, make serious mental headway into your ideas and get the creative faucet flowing.
97. **Runway.** Your first creative **output** that builds momentum, paves the way for prolificacy and does the talking for you.
98. **Safety container.** A space without circumference where judgment can't enter, a free venue where ideas can run free without the scrutiny of readers, critics, editors and yourself.
99. **Selective indifference.** Being discerning enough not to dwell on meaningless matters, conserving your best energies for your creative efforts.
100. **Self organization.** Some form of global order or coordination arises out of the local interactions between the components of an initially disordered system.
101. **Side door.** Increasing output by expanding the definition, changing the context and lowering the threat level of your work.

102. **Solvas perambulator.** Using rhythmic, repetitive exercise or action to clear your mind, stabilize your emotions and increase the production and release of endorphins to pump the well of creativity.
103. **Stalling maneuver.** Buying yourself time in group meetings, interviews and presentations, so that you can collect your thoughts and build anticipation around your message.
104. **Stiletto moment.** Concentrating our portfolio of talents into a tight little package that demonstrates the full firepower of our creative arsenal.
105. **The shove.** The decisive interaction in which a trusted friend eventually compels and artist to make a key change or take a massive risk in their creative life.
106. **Thievery muscles.** Respectfully and ethically other people’s ideas as sparks to superimpose your own meaning and take the idea somewhere else, somewhere different, somewhere better, until the original idea can no longer be identified.
107. **Tourniquet.** Creating a healthy sense of distance from your work by damming up the creative flow, compressing the circulation and applying enough pressure so there’s an explosion waiting for you when you’re ready to return.
108. **Unconscious rumination.** Allowing your inner mind to get to work mulling over, sorting out, organizing and categorizing material that has been previously absorbed, ultimately generating an idea at a time when the mental spotlight isn’t on it.
109. **Unfinishing.** Approaching the creative process as a fluid experience, viewing each piece of output as a constantly evolving organism, within the ecosystem of my larger body of work.
110. **Uptime.** The period of time when our creative machine is functioning and available for use.
111. **Victory dance.** A small, customized reward that commemorates the fruits of your motivation and equips you to be what the moment requires.
112. **Walking the factory floor.** Creating the ritual of an established parcel of structured curiosity, whereby you casually and thoughtfully peruse every idea you’ve recently accumulated.

113. **Wherewithal.** Everything creator need to buttress the opportunity to make art, including knowledge, resources and courage.
114. **Whitespace.** Defining yourself by the work you decline, so as to avoid the erosion of your time, the decay of your focus and the meaninglessness of your work.
115. **Working modular.** Treating each thought as an uncategorized **chunk** of creative material, an objective, portable piece content that accumulates and categorizes into its own structure.