

# Imagining

Beyond Purpose & Creativity

Carlos Aleman

Edited by Jean Aleman

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ISBN: 1540580423

ISBN-13: 978-1540580429

To my beloved wife, Ching-Yi (Jean)

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## IMAGINING

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FORWARD BY  
AWARD WINNING AUTHOR,  
MANUEL A. MELÉNDEZ

In his latest book, *Imagining*, a non-fiction offering, Carlos states: “This book is not based on any particular scientific study or methodology. Neither is it a book that offers nebulous suggestion about *thinking outside the box*. The box puzzle that you are trying to draw lines to connect the dots isn’t real. Your imagination, however, is.”

Using references from many illustrious minds, he breaks down the fundamentals about seeking and mastering your creative imagination. In writing, or any other form of creativity, the imaginative mind takes the lead role in determining the path the person must take.

Throughout the book you’ll find suggestions that allows the mind to expand and not be limited in seeing the world in only the basic black and white colors. It celebrates the uniqueness of our beings, and the powers that a creative and fun mind possesses.

Is the book going to make you a better writer? A better artist? A better composer? Those are paradoxical questions, for there are no right or wrong answers, but this is the most obvious answer. The book will make you think, will encourage you to explore within the valleys and mountains, and endless seas that we all have in our possession—in our souls.

It will push you to step away from the daily humdrum, and stimulate you in making the acquaintance of the creative realm that awaits you. It will whisper in your ear that it’s okay to make

CARLOS ALEMAN

daydreams as real as you want them to be. Or as Carlos wrote: “Please believe that you might just be capable of more than you ever thought. Use your imagination lovingly and wisely. Daydream and fantasize about make-believe worlds that provide sanctuaries for troubled souls...”

Manuel A. Meléndez  
*Award Winning Author*



IMAGINING

# INTRODUCTION

*"The way to know life is to love many things."*  
—Vincent Van Gogh

"One's art goes as far and as deep as one's  
love goes." —Andrew Wyeth

If you've ever traveled to other countries, you may have noticed that it's not that hard to fall in love with new places and people. You may develop a reverence and appreciation for culture and the diversity of life encountered on a journey. After all, it is an adventure—you're probably in a good mood and everything seems magical and wonderful.

Assuming you're traveling with good company and stress is kept to a minimum, the mind has a tendency to quiet down and become very observant of its surroundings. You may even feel that your experiences are somewhat mystical and transcendent.

If such a shift in perception happens, you might find yourself feeling interconnected with others. You begin considering quaint old expressions such as the brotherhood of mankind and the mountaintop experience, or perhaps everything all at once.

Or let me give you another example: You've attended a motivational seminar or gone to a spiritual retreat. You have an amazing time and sense that somehow your batteries are recharged and you're ready to take on the world again.

Someone said just the right thing, or something in your mind made the most timely connection. You've had a breakthrough and now you're full of energy and enthusiasm. You can't even remember what it was like not to be driven and have a sense of purpose. I've had these types of experiences, essentially getting away from life and finding myself *newly filled with life*.

In 1984, I went with a college overseas study group to Italy. I applied for a student loan that I had no idea how to pay back and soon I was on an artistic pilgrimage in cities like Florence and Rome, looking at some of the greatest art in the history of the world.

The works of Bernini, Botticelli, Michelangelo, da Vinci and many others spoke to me in ways no painting or figure drawing class could. Something inside of me resonated with what seemed to be a higher form of intelligence, as if the Italian masters were winking with an expression that could be interpreted as: You understand—you get it. There's really nothing else to say—is there?

Leaving behind the Tuscan landscapes, towns and cities overflowing with brilliance and treasure to return home, I understood that I would never be the same again. I had fallen in love with a country and its warm people as well as a culture that can't be described in books or humanities courses. From that moment on, I knew that I needed to be an artist, someone that spoke the language of aesthetics and symbolism, creativity and imagination. That's what can happen when you fall in love.

In 1996, I met my wife, Jean. The world felt new. It was the American Northeast this time that became the backdrop for our drama—with all kinds of sights and sounds unfamiliar to me—new people to meet and ideas to consider. And of course being in love with my wife to be gave me the emotional component to be receptive and open to experience. Together, we explored museums, architecture, food and all seemed wonderful and new.

Perhaps, because of my mood and inspired state, I soon began to teach myself computer skills and eventually landed a job working for a technology company as a web designer and later a product designer. At the time, there were many people who didn't even know

what the internet was, so you might say that this timely career change also came out of love.

In 2008, my wife and I made our first long trip together to the island of Maui. We realized that we could finally afford to go on the honeymoon we never had. Exploring the winding roads through a tropical paradise, feeling the mist from waterfalls, hiking through bamboo forests and volcanic craters, all these things seemed to indicate to me that my life was somehow complete.

All the pains and heartbreaks of life, the years of frustration, the struggles, the fears and anxieties common to most—all these things had been worth it. As far as I was concerned, I could declare that one odd little soul in this world had deduced that his life had been, for the most part, pretty darn good.

However, an idea came to me (there's always something new). It was at this time in my life that I decided to become an author—not something I ever thought I would be any good at. After all, wasn't that something a person should want from the time you they're in high school? I had known many a young aspiring writer informing their inner circle that they were taking creative writing classes and somehow exuding the quality of having an IQ levels above everyone else. As it turned out, it wasn't rocket science or brain surgery, pardon the clichés.

I had simply determined that I might do a better job than some other writers. You may have noticed, most books aren't Pulitzer Prize material. Writing for most people is essentially entertainment. Some of it pulls at your heartstrings, some books aren't meant to be taken seriously at all, and of course, some writing does lack natural talent, or at least could have been better edited. (Quick tip: write as though you were speaking to someone. Slip into flowery language occasionally, but only for you own amusement.)

On the other hand, what had the opposite effect on me and gave me the most motivation to become a writer were extremely well written books. There's nothing like a beautiful story that slowly puts one in a trance—nothing like the manifestation of something that is almost otherworldly to cause a writer to wish they could do the same.

With writing as in a sculpture by Michelangelo, something is conveyed from an ideal plane of existence. But unlike sculpture, one finds the audacity to express what words cannot convey with... words. Again, creativity baffles our sensibilities. The process is

somewhat akin to a child watching their favorite sports hero and wanting to go outside and pretend to be that person. The play, the dance, the brushstroke are in and of themselves enough.

You might see what I'm getting at here, being childlike, inspired and in love with your muse, whatever it may be, is the stuff that fuels the creative process. I experienced this phenomenon again in 2010 when I went to China. Two years later, my solo art exhibit opened with a gallery full of paintings inspired by the modernity and technology of the Shanghai World Expo and the ancient art and culture of Beijing and other cities. It was about this time that my first novel was named a finalist in the International Latino Book Awards.

In 2013, it happened yet again. I spent cherry blossom week in Kyoto, Japan. And two years after that I was greeting art lovers at a well-attended solo exhibit opening featuring my paintings and kokeshi dolls inspired by the geisha, maiko, samurai, manga, anime, and—well, you get it—things that were exciting and new to me. Probably, at that very moment, there was a younger version of myself, perhaps inside the International Manga Museum in Kyoto, realizing that they would never be the same—they were hopelessly in love, needing from that moment on to be an artist.

And so I continue to write and paint and consult for technology companies. But, you may wonder, where does all the creative fuel come from? One can't possibly be traveling the world at all times, finding new things and brimming with inspiration. What I have described seems like a dream, what about the real world? Projects are due. Not everything is like fine art. Not every task that requires coming up with an idea is going to involve a trip to a museum and an emotional encounter with the ineffable, divine and sublime.

Life can be humdrum and practical. Even work that may seem exciting at first and at least allow greater freedom than endless repetitive tasks can eventually lose its appeal. Most people simply need the ideas to come—however they come. Nearly all creative challenges have more to do with everyday problem solving than changing the world. The client needs a different look for a web page. The online news aggregator needs a feature written for its column. A deadline is fast approaching and you're drawing a blank.

Well, we both know that projects can be dropped upon us when we least expect them and sometimes when we're not even in the mood to tackle them. How do we tap into our imagination? How do

we produce when there are no specs or clues or creative direction?

As a writer, visual artist and web developer, I've surveyed the territory, experienced both frustration and eureka moments, and have found that most creative endeavors share much in common. As with art, experience reveals much more than any set of instructions or assembly manual.

So, to put it in the nomenclature of a novelist, I won't tell you, I'll show you. Just like learning a language by immersion, you might find that in my wringing out of thoughts, stories and happenings, some things might cling to you and even become a part of your own way of figuring things out.

Spend a little time with me and perhaps crunch time won't be so crunchy anymore and the future won't look like a gauntlet of intimidating challenges. You may even learn to smile with eagerness when asked to do the impossible.

This book is not based on any particular scientific study or methodology. Neither is it a book that offers nebulous suggestions about *thinking outside the box*. The box puzzle that you are trying to draw lines to connect isn't real. Your imagination, however, is. That's probably why creativity workshops have been around for decades and the ideas still don't come, despite the researchers well-meaning counsel to extend the lines outside those confounded dots.

Whether you want to be a multidisciplinary artist who writes and paints like William Blake (Yeah, the guy did both) or make your own personal Steve Jobs happy (insert your boss' name here), this book will give you some concepts to think about, or perhaps reveal the notions we need to abandon in order to make something appear out of nothing.

I happen to make frequent trips out into the place where the big question mark lies. I'll go out again and this time take you with me, sharing my life and creative journey. It's nothing short of a pleasure to do so. Stay close, I have much to say. Excuse me if I get a little giddy talking about a subject so dear to me—creativity.

IMAGINING

# THE QUESTION MARK AT THE BOTTOM OF THE OCEAN

*“Whatever it is you're seeking won't come in the form  
you're expecting.”*

— Haruki Murakami

*“When it is working, you completely go into another place,  
you're tapping into things that are totally universal,  
completely beyond your ego and your own self. That's what  
it's all about.”*

—Keith Haring

I sense the need to write another short introduction. This one will be brief, I promise. Essentially, I just wanted to point out a couple of things before we consider the act of imagining and all this much to do about purpose, creativity and the great beyond.



## IMAGINING

Much has been written about the search for happiness and inner peace. If you've read your share of personal development books and have been fortunate enough to catch glimpses of the illusive emotional freedom and answers you seek, good for you.

Whether it's contemplative prayer or Zen or some awakening sparked by reading the writings of a Franciscan monk or psychologist, you've no doubt been introduced to the benefits of quieting the mind and removing worries, negativity, doubts and all kinds of useless thoughts.

You may have even come to the realization that your mind is not totally who you are. More often than not, it is just an out of control chatter box inside the echo chamber of your head. Try to resist the mind and it will sabotage all your efforts towards finding happiness. It's a pesky little rascal. However, one can't deny it's a magnificent tool.

Therefore, much of this book will have to do with taking advantage of this wild and mischievous tool—the mind, with all its tendencies toward compulsive thinking, delusion, drama and unusual associations.

Without being overly simplistic, let's just say we're not so much interested in attaining enlightenment for the time being, merely exploiting the peculiarities of your mental activity, riding the rollercoaster of madness towards productivity and creativity.

We will explore the subject of purpose and meaning later in this book, but first let's make our case for operating a screaming chainsaw with its razor sharp metal teeth wielding the creation and destruction of worlds and then putting it safely away, or in other words, benefiting from the richness of our imaginations and then returning to a place of emotional balance and mental serenity or at least getting a good night's sleep.

## WHERE'S THE LIGHTSWITCH?

In the introduction (the first one), I eluded to travel and experiences as a source for inspiration. This, however, depends on how receptive we are to the things that are foreign, different and possibly strange to us.

Our perceptions may cause us to regard subject matter with fear

or fondness, suspicion or admiration. But rather than flying off to a faraway destination (you can if you want), why don't we treat the immediate world around us as our muse—our source of ideas and creativity. The familiar everyday existence we're accustomed to—*you're kidding, right?* You may ask.

If you're like most people, the world you know has lost its magic, and mystery has been replaced by knowing all too well what motivations, hidden agendas and selfishness are common in the affairs of men.

Work is drudgery, the commute is lifeless and monotonous. Frustrations manifest themselves as resentment, resentment turns into bitterness, and bitterness searches for scapegoats to blame or offer some possible explanation (that's if self-loathing doesn't become your crutch).

The world needs to make sense after all. With some sort of worldview in place, certain preconceived notions can make us feel secure. A dark room seems a lot less threatening when you feel certain of what it contains.

Or perhaps you're a person who sees life as beautiful, the job, morning commute and life in general are overflowing with goodness and satisfaction even in the face of troubles and difficulties. Kudos to you. The dark room becomes a fun challenge, bruised toes and shins are as welcomed as a few dings are by a grinning athlete about to partake in a full contact sport. You navigate the room anticipating bumping into a few things, but eventually finding the light switch.

But whether you're adventurous or timid, an idealist or realist, aggressive or passive—as you look for the light switch with reckless abandon or with fear and trembling, you may soon start to wonder if there is even a lamp at all.

Did someone forget to wire the room for electricity? Was the power bill paid? Did someone walk off with a floor lamp? Are there any light panels in the ceiling? When the ideas don't come it's an equal playing field. Having a certain personality or temperament doesn't automatically grant you more bandwidth for creativity.

## THE BOTTOM OF THE OCEAN

For the sake of simplicity and to cover a multitude of assumptions

with a simple term, let's call this place where ideas come from *the big question mark at the bottom of the ocean*.

A neuro scientist might be able to explain to us how marvelous the brain is with its 100 billion neurons doing amazing things. A psychologist may point to the unconscious mind. There may be theories about deities, faeries, angels and interdimensional beings, or the universe or multiverse being a computer simulation.

But, for now, let's just admit (or at least suspend our convictions) that we don't know where the ideas happen or come from. Good. Now that we've got that out of the way, let's talk about perceptions.

I don't want to change the way you think or how you process the world around you. However, I would very much like to shift your awareness. Relax, I have no powers of mind control and I'm not a member of the illuminati.

I simply want you to be an observer of sorts—but only when you need to be. Instead of being an active participant of the human race, let's sit at a make-believe outdoor café and people-watch. That'll be our first exercise. In your mind, observe people as if you're not of this world, simply watching the drama of life unfold without any judgment or internal dialogue.

*Wait! How does one do that?*

Well, all right. Let's take one step back. Before we can observe, we must become the observer. But how? Let's try something quite absurd—but effective. Go outside and search until you find a little creature like an ant and project your world on to it.

Yes, you heard me right. Find your little bug or bird friend and imagine it thinking all your thoughts: *Oh, why does so and so never call. It's so unfair how they treated me. I wonder what will happen with that. What's going to happen if things keep going like this? Is this book going to help at all?*

Go ahead, try it. I'll wait.

Intermission music: The Girl from Ipanema...

The Devil's Advocate: *Hey—why does it always have to be The Girl from Ipanema?*

Author: *Fine, whatever music you like.*

As the little fellow is running along the concrete sidewalk or wherever you've found it, it might produce a chuckle to think of it so

preoccupied with concerns. With that chuckle, something quite profound has happened (laughter is a good indicator). You've had a shift in awareness. You might find that the mind has become quiet. You may even see in more vibrant colors the world around you. There may be the sense that you're more alive, having separated yourself from all your worries and concerns. Or there may be a subtle feeling of detachment—you're observing from a different perspective than you're used to.

*Hey—nothing's happening*, you might say.

Try this on for size. Take a moment to observe your thoughts. In doing this, your mental process may shut down momentarily, but eventually the thoughts will come (they always do). Once you can objectively watch a thought appear in your head and then either disappear or be replaced by another thought, an obvious question presents itself: If you can observe your thoughts, which you are doing the observing?

At the risk of being presumptuous, I would venture to say that there is a thinking you as well as a deeper you—a background awareness, if you will.

Whether you can detach from your sense of identity and mental activity by watching an ant crawling on the ground, or by observing your mind from a deeper state, you have succeeded in going beyond normal consciousness.

As with the suspension of disbelief required when watching a movie, a loss of who you are at a basic level is required in order to leave the normal awareness as a preparatory step for what comes next.

If you're seeking some enlightenment or nirvana experience, you would have to transcend mind and ego completely, but what use would that be to someone looking for an idea or solution? Forgive me for saying this, but leave happiness and inner peace to the monks when you're trying to access your imagination.

Embrace your absurd and ridiculous self and create something (the second step). In fact, you might find that if you discard your obsession for self-improvement and personal growth, happiness might finally stop running to get away from you, the perfectionist.

## THE IMAGINARY CAFÉ

Let's say that you've succeeded in expanding your consciousness (by laughing at an ant, observing your mind or other method), let's put this new awareness to the test by filling your head again with runaway thoughts. Your background conscious awareness will not be allowed to observe the throngs of delirious opinions, notions, memories or concepts, nor will it interfere in any manner. No, no, no! Put away your higher consciousness for the time being.

Imagine sitting at a café and viewing life as if watching a movie (Take a moment to visualize this).

As you think about the make-believe people walking past, you'll be tempted to make judgments about them, perhaps based on stereotypes or actual people you know.

The guy with the big ego that can't help but be in a constant state of indignation, easily offended by everything, or so his ego demands. The liberal that is paranoid of corporations. The conservative that is paranoid of government. And then there are the people that appear a certain way on the outside. They've never wronged you, but somehow you sense that they could go berserk at any moment.

Why are you being so hard on these imaginary people? Why are you forming these judgments? Surely you can get along with people who think differently. It's okay, we all do it (Again, believing that we understand certain things about the world can make a dark room less scary).

If you were actually able to imagine people walking past a café, give yourself a pat on the shoulder. That's quite an imagination you have!

Now that you've got the wheels in your head spinning at a good clip, let's come to a full appreciation of life as it unfolds with a running commentary included. Observe and ponder, notice and interpret. Don't worry about being right, you're awakening your inner dialog and creativity. You're daydreaming.

When watching a film, you might be impressed by the job that the cinematographer is doing as well as the musical score and many other aspects to the production. Similarly, being in a creative state of mind involves seeing the sum as well as sometimes noticing its parts

all working together. Finding something interesting, you turn to yourself—your other self sitting next to you—and say, *Isn't that something?*

A painter is often equally aware of the negative space of a composition as he or she is of the subject. A composer's brilliance fills the silence in a musical score in the same way a graphic designer gives the eye a place to rest. A novelist imagines characters that are deeply flawed yet fascinating, usually becoming very fond of them and wanting nothing more than to go on at length describing them to readers. In short, the creative mulls everything over, examines subjects from every angle and immerses him or herself within the gaps and spaces.

This is achieved by observing life in its totality. The negative and positive areas, silence and imperfections, ordinary and strange, sacred and comical, tender and abrasive, sincere and lofty, inexplicable and obvious—that and whatever you can consider by swallowing a dictionary or thesaurus—is the splintering of reality into its many parts. With parts, you can build and play.

**Try to notice everything** no matter where you are: The shelf that sticks slightly out of the bookcase, the speck on the table, the way your friend likes to use the expressions 'at the end of the day' and 'at any rate' when he's on the phone.

If you're a writer, these things will come in handy when developing a character. The person you can't stand because they're so opinionated and self-centered, becomes the protagonist you proudly write about.

Seeing yourself as an observer instead of a participant in life can give you just enough separation from reality to allow your imagination to flourish in many different creative disciplines.

Memories are also powerful fuel for creativity. There's nothing like a few bad relationships and miserable friendships to inspire a song, book, dance or series of paintings (pardon me for bringing up old lovers!). But again, detachment is the key. If you can practice the discipline of acceptance and let go of resentments and cares, life is your clay.

Let's go deeper. You're at the outdoor café in your head watching people go by. Perhaps there's one character that keeps

walking by, a person that your mind holds on to. Take a few moments to close your eyes and picture this. Are they wearing sunglasses? An overcoat? What is the length of their hair? Why are you conjuring up the image of this particular person?

It may not matter. At least you've established a connection to your subconscious or the big question mark at the bottom of the ocean. Yet, you find it intriguing that this back channel for communication has indeed been established.

There's nothing like a good mystery. Don't ever tell the bigfoot enthusiast that there's no such thing as a giant hairy sasquatch. Let their life be filled with the excitement of mystery. You never know, they might just find bigfoot one day. In the same way, get excited about the possibility of strange and impossible things lurking in your subconscious or whatever you want to call the punctuation symbol deep in the Mariana Trench.

Suppose you're a realist. You're not concerned with fanciful imagery and making contact with the subconscious. You're using some form of media to draw attention to war or human rights concerns, the plight of the oppressed, humanity's inhumanity towards man, or the geopolitical socioeconomic ramifications of apathy. You don't have time for people-watching in an imaginary café or any such 'nonsense.'

However, you still need to activate your creativity to come up with ideas in order to tell a story and convey information effectively. It is necessary to approach the big question mark at the bottom of the ocean wearing the right diving gear and prepared for great drama. Even if you're a realist, you need to somewhat detach yourself from reality.

The truth is that it's not a hard thing to do. Your mind naturally wants to imagine scenarios in which there is great excitement and things of interest. For example, think of something you don't want to do. You'll find it easy to come up with many excuses not to go to a place or start a task.

Or even try to stop the mind from obsessing about problems and possible outcomes and you'll find it almost impossible to prevent yourself from doing these things. Go to a meditation gathering in search of inner peace and you might soon discover that your mind is more active than ever, impairing every effort to raise your level of consciousness and find that illusive tranquility.

The mind loves drama, crisis, action and adventure. It also loves a good movie, trashy novel or political scandal. The last thing it wants is to be bored. Why do you think the news networks get higher ratings when there's a calamity, natural or manmade? The mind wants to be entertained. Why do people like horror movies? Because fear is a form of arousal. Why are we unwilling to let go of the past? The past gives us something to obsess about.

It seems like a human frailty, but we can use this tendency to ruminate, obsess and overthink to our advantage. The key is to set our mind loose at the outdoor café and allow the imagination too feed off this tendency toward off the rail thinking.

The big question mark at the bottom of the ocean will look down upon the soul lost in imaginings and open the floodgates of ideas, a steady stream or just the infinitesimal spark you needed. With high favor, a grin of satisfaction, a wink and pat on the head, the question mark delivers the goods.

Summary: Pray, meditate or take a nap. Do something to rest your brain. Then turn it on full throttle and imagine.





# THE DARK

*“How can I be substantial if I do not cast a shadow? I  
must have a dark side also If I am to be whole”*

— C.G. Jung

## WHAT NOT TO DO

It is important to avoid deliberately trying to be creative. The harder you concentrate and make an effort towards creativity, the more elusive you’ll find your answers and light switches to be.

However, I can think of two exceptions: René Descartes, who locked himself in a room with an oven until formulating analytical geometry and the famous philosophical statement “I think therefore I am.” He believed these things were revealed to him in three visions from a divine spirit.

The other example that comes to mind is of Siddhārtha Gautama sitting under a Bodhi tree vowing never to leave until he had found the answers to human suffering. After 49 days he became the Buddha, which means Awakened One.

I suspect that in both cases, the analytical mind yielded to a quiet meditative state of stillness and receptivity towards unconventional perspectives (If you’ve ever meditated as a novice, you may have noticed that the mind quiets down after about twenty minutes. It seems as if it has run out of things to think about).

Eventually, the silence becomes too much and the person returns toward thinking, pondering and considering. But this time, the mind is rested and an idea greets the thinker like a traveler that had been waiting for someone with a refreshed and revitalized attention.

My point is that the more you force yourself to concentrate, the less you'll arrive at anything new (Forced concentration may work well for a math problem, but not so much with creativity).

Beat your head against the desk as much as you want, the solution will come later when the analysis has ceased, while taking a shower or driving a car, when our attention is divided and our brain can't be fully engaged by a problem and is somewhat relaxed and thus has slipped into a form of awareness similar to daydreaming.

You can lock yourself in a room with an oven or sit under a Bodhi tree, but I don't recommend it. Forcing yourself to come up with an idea is like trying to fall asleep by concentrating on drowsiness. You might eventually enter sleep, but your effort by no means helped. That's not to say that you search for ideas passively. A strong desire for the solution you seek may just signal the big question mark at the bottom of the ocean that you're in need of something magical.

The writer and film director, M. Night Shyamalan, is known (or despised by critics) for his surprise endings. A plot twist came at the end of *The Sixth Sense*, when the lead character realizes that he is a ghost (I make no spoiler apologies—it's an old movie).

Shyamalan had originally written the story without the twist, but a feeling that there needed to be something more kept nagging at him. Eventually the idea came, I assume when he least expected it. No doubt, his craving for a better ending led to his stroke of genius.

It's been said that the great classical composer, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, wrote music on a billiards table, rolling balls in geometrical patterns and watching how the light reflected upon them. Again, an example of divided attention, I assume so that his mind wouldn't concentrate too hard on what he was doing.

A deadline may also cause ideas to arrive as one 'brain storm' after another. Anxiety and urgency seem to be like performance enhancing substances when it comes to stimulating creativity. Concepts, visions and solutions will sometimes pop into your head without you even straining to lift anything with your intellectual,

scientific or artistic muscles.

Do not search for ideas. Let them find *you*.

## NON-CONCEPTUAL THINKING

If we're going to consider this big question mark at the bottom of the ocean, we'll have to enter strange and possibly prickly territory. The term *mystical* may conjure up images for you of flakey people that are too 'out there' to function. You may not want to associate with such people, much less become one, but let's see if we can remain grounded and free of eccentricities while examining a powerful concept, or rather, lack of a concept.

Non-conceptual thinking has been referred to as a higher intelligence. Your cerebrum (the thinking part of the brain) does a wonderful job analyzing, categorizing, making all kinds of associations and discerning threat levels and a whole host of important functions. Most of these things are based on storing and recalling knowledge.

A creative person's abilities go far beyond knowledge and accesses a form of intelligence that actually creates knowledge that had not previously existed. This might have something to do with thinking less and perhaps using a more intuitive part of the brain or whatever question mark at the bottom of the ocean explanation you might prefer.

I may mistakenly assume that the cerebrum is who I am—associating identity with reasoning intelligence. I only wish my thinking mind was half as capable as my cells, able to move oxygen, blood and nutrients around the body, break down and absorb food, regulate metabolism, defend against viruses, breathe and a multitude of other processes I'm just not the genius chemist or biologist to understand.

None of these things has to do with the stuff my mind thinks about. There's some higher form of intelligence at play in the body. Likewise, I would like you to consider, that contemplating a state beyond concepts is a highly sophisticated approach to entering the realm of creativity.

This is where the strange stuff happens. Imagine a universe that has no parts. Everything is one (non-duality). Suppose you've had

your eyes opened in such a way that you can see past what you considered separateness. Now you're drinking in deep all of existence without it's labels and boundaries. Concepts vanish. Even the words, *everything is one*, becomes a concept, and the word, *concept*, is only a concept.

If you can see past the labels that describe reality, congratulations, you have gone beyond the mind. What's next? Let's take apart the mind. Interesting little cerebrum we have. Thoughts pass by like little clouds before a blue sky—each one a question or worry or some pondering.

Before we dive in and explore, note that it helps to remember things you have thought about in the past. Observing yourself think while in the act of thinking is a bit tricky. So bring up an old conversation, happening or a life event you once considered.

If you are highly observant, you may be able to laugh at some of the times you sensed danger where there was none, assumed that others found you unattractive, went to extremes, entertained high expectations and focused on the negative or even surprised yourself by demanding a glorious outcome.

You can ignore the past counterproductive and unenlightened assumptions or revel in instances optimism, after all, you're now seeing the big picture from a higher perspective and with hindsight. However, now you can sift through your thinking patterns and search of ideas. There might just be a base metal in your contemplations and reactions that through the alchemy of imagination becomes gold.

On what planet would you build the city of your dreams—one that is barren of resources and minerals, or one that is plentiful with them? If you've been a compulsive thinker all your life, it may not help you with your search for inner peace, but assuming you know how to rest your mind, you've got a warehouse abundant with content to spark ideas.

Think of the overactive mind as the taxicab that brings you to the train station. The train that takes you across a continent is your higher intelligence. As an example, take Albert Einstein's grappling with theoretical physics and the mathematical equations he used to prove and explain his discoveries. His brain was surely in overdrive when in the throes of scientific investigation.

However, please note that it was his ability to let go and daydream that produced his famous thought experiments—riding an

elevator in a freefall, on a rocket ship accelerating, and orbiting the sun as it bends space-time. There would be no theories or discoveries without imagination.

*“Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.”*

—Albert Einstein

You wouldn’t normally think of Einstein when contemplating non-conceptual thinking, for there are a lot of concepts being considered in his thought experiments.

However, I simply want to point out that the mind specializes in knowledge, and the imagination transcends the mind and reaches for something beyond information and understanding.

It’s as if the big question mark at the bottom of the ocean speaks a different language or exists in a different dimension with different physical laws. To access it, we must abandon all the things that make us feel safe in the dark.

In our travels to a secret island, we hand over our weapons to the guard and ask to see the super villain. We are then patted down, and once deemed free of analysis and strongly held opinions, we are allowed to see all the strange experiments and twisted inventions of the mad genius called the imagination.

## THE DARK SIDE

Creativity comes from the dark side. Wait—it’s not as bad as it sounds. Although there’s a gene associated with creativity and mental illness, and many famous artists and writers have struggled with mood disorders, you don’t need to be a tortured artist to come up with an idea.<sup>1</sup> However, you may want to note that some creatives simply have a hard time filtering out stimuli.

The creative person is often overwhelmed by their senses and may not have a powerful attention span or do well in a learning environment. That’s not to say there haven’t been many extremely

creative scholars, academics and intellectuals.

However, being sensitive, easily distracted and able to allow more sights, sounds and impertinent thoughts does have its advantages and sometimes results in unusual conclusions or unconventional theories, hallmarks of what is considered to be the creative mind.

To be insensitive is a failure to see worth in the world and in life. Why not accept the box of Crayola's and Legos you might need at a later time? To permit a cornucopia of experiences, emotions, philosophies, exhibits, books and conversations to be absorbed into your consciousness is your trip to the art supply store.

Of course, sensitivity can lead to discouragement and depression (sometimes the same thing). Fortunately, with age comes wisdom and the learning of many coping techniques. If you don't have a serious mood disorder that requires medication, you might be able to remain content and happy most of the time by keeping your blood sugar stable, knowing which foods you're allergic to, guarding against mineral deficiencies, limiting caffeine and not allowing your mind to ruminate.

(If you're in the midst of the struggle, you can indeed get better. Don't lose heart—get help if needed. Sorry to be so brief about such a serious topic.)

Your creativity may come from the 'dark side,' but that by no means is a life sentence of misery. In fact, it could turn out to be your very opposite—the thing that makes you fascinating, eccentric, productive and...happy.

Besides the mental suffering we inflict upon ourselves, the dark side is really not so dark. Creativity is typically benevolent—its opposite is destruction. Humans have a long tragic history of choosing destruction over creativity.

Oppression, exploitation and violence permeates our species. Man's devastation of nature, wars, indifference and cruelty, the throwing of stones when a person is caught falling from grace, the masses with eyes glued to their televisions in hopes of a talk show erupting into fist fighting or chair throwing.

These things seem to indicate that there is something about caring that deeply that frightens us. Many choose hate, suspicion and fear over love. Destruction and hate—love and creativity. Do you

see a pattern?

The old adage, love until it hurts, can be applied to the creative process. The more splendid, remarkable and interesting you find a subject, the better the chances that you'll be inspired to approach it more fully, dedicating art and poetry to it or posting an opinion on a blog.

Even if you simply need to solve a conundrum that is not particularly interesting, respecting the complexity of the problem can shift your awareness to a more imaginative state. Have you ever heard of a teacher that made a certain subject 'more fun and interesting?' Don't the students generally do better?

Even if you're a hardened cynic of an artist, you take a long drag on a cigarette, spit on the ground, splatter paint on a canvas and declare 'life is garbage—I will show everyone!' You were probably once inspired by a philosopher, actor, activist, musician or friend that caused you to forever love the idea of being a hardened realist.

Righteous indignation may lead to finding a meaningful direction in life. Positive and negative energies can coalesce to take on a cause. You may even want to take a moment to think about the one thing that angers you most. It could very well lead to finding your purpose in life.

However, the means by which you arrive at the precise way you will accomplish your goals, the thing that fires your imagination, the ultimate fuel to defeat whatever injustice you perceive—will not come from anger, but hope and a deep love for something.

## **CHOCOLATEY GOODNESS**

Take hope, light and darkness, chaos and serenity—let them collide like quantum particles and make something that has the aroma of the unraveling of a mystery. Somewhere between the outdoor café and the big question mark at the bottom of the ocean, a pattern or shape emerges, a glimmer of a possibility, déjà vu, and maybe a step closer to a pleasant sort of confusion (yes, you heard me right).

And now that you've taken this leap of faith and you're vulnerable and precariously close to the edge of the abyss, the answer presents itself.

I don't know how Einstein was able to imagine riding a beam of



light. I'm not sure how a composer writes melodies and counter melodies, scribbling notations on a treble clef, bass clef, alto and tenor.

If we examine closely how another person harnesses their creativity, we might be discouraged. Yet rest assured, it's a lot easier to be creative in your own personal and unique way.

If someone picks up an instrument you're familiar with, plays it and says, 'do exactly as I just did.' Let them see the mischievous glint in your eye as you extemporaneously perform a series of notes or chords and ask if they would care to play it back to you.

You can always remark that they didn't play it quite the same way as you did. They mistimed one of the notes—their version lacked a certain nuance. Learning is always harder than creating. Do you see my point? Creativity is easy. Even a baby babbling gibberish is participating in a creative endeavor.

Of course what we're striving for is achieving our highest potential and arriving at truly worthwhile breakthroughs and solutions, whether it's an idea to present at a small company meeting or something that changes the world. Even a modest suggestion directed at others can be highly rewarding and fulfilling if you keep at it, making it a way of life.

I stumbled upon one of those ideas (the type of idea one can keep repeating in hopes of eventually wearing down those in an ever increasing circle of influence). You might think it trite or naïve, but it's just my two cents and perhaps a way to encourage others.

This is what happened: (As usual, with something quite insignificant) When I returned from Kyoto in 2013, I discovered that Japanese coins could not be converted to US money at the airport foreign currency exchange booth. The coins were worth significantly more than American quarters and nickels.

I realized that an opportunity to purchase more souvenirs had slipped away. The one Japanese kokeshi doll I picked up at an Osaka train station and brought back stateside seemed lonely and in want of a friend. In some serendipitous twist of fate, one of my first trips out of the house was to a Japanese museum. The exhibit? Kokeshi dolls.

Big, small, simple, elaborate, lanky, plump and plum, kokeshi dolls of all sizes masterfully carved out of wood and hand painted. It was as if hundreds of dolls had followed me back from Kyoto to tantalize and torment me.

How would I respond to such a spectacle? Well, I couldn't buy these priceless works of art, so I set out to make my own. I wasn't a wood worker, so I found alternate methods such as papier-mâché and duct tape (not being good at something forces creativity upon us).

As I prepared for a summer art show, I found myself working on paintings and kokeshi dolls in sepia tones. A craft paint that became my favorite hue was 'dark chocolate brown.' This clever name for a color prompted me to think of some way to use it in the title of the exhibit.

I needed to come up with some grand unifying theory. Self: What is dark chocolate? What's so great about it? Reply to self: Dark chocolate is the best of all chocolates, the nutritious, antioxidant rich deliciousness derived from the cocoa seed.

There—I had it. **Dark Chocolate is the best version of something.** On opening night, art lovers poured into the gallery to see the exhibit entitled, Dark Chocolate Japan. With the zeal of a fanatic, I told everyone I could that we should try to see the best in everything.

My art was an expression of love for the ancient and traditional, modern and unconventional, the profound and frivolous, the anime, manga, geisha and samurai, monster movies and video games.

Of course, a critic could accuse me of cultural appropriation and bad taste, but I was sticking to my message of love and admiration. Ignore the cheap milk chocolate defiling our existence and focus on the dark. No matter how contrary it seems to our experience, good stuff is everywhere.

It's interesting to consider that dark has been used in a positive sense before. The early Christian monks known as the desert fathers used the expression, *knowing by darkness* or simply *darkness*. It was their way of conceding that to achieve higher levels of understanding, a person needed to undergo a sort of dying to thoughts, opinions, analysis and concepts.

Out there (maybe hidden deep within the big question mark at the bottom of the ocean) one might be able to find what normal human states of consciousness cannot grasp—phenomenon beyond words or descriptions.

I associate all these things with darkness, not malevolence and evil such as the forces of darkness, but the beauty of mystery, the

stars shining brightly in an exceptionally black night.

Ideas have a snowball effect. The more you contemplate them, you'll find that they are like a house with many rooms, each door a pathway to something new. If you've ever heard businesspeople brainstorming at a meeting, you'll know they're on to something when an idea gets everyone so excited that it triggers *more* ideas.

Back to the chocolate. This dark way of seeing things is by no means an easy task. By nature, I tend to be a cynic. I've studied enough history and watched enough news to venture that the city council is corrupt, the selfish and power-hungry rise to the top in most organizations, children are abused, viruses are evolving and figuring out how to destroy us, wild animals tear each other to pieces and a horrific natural disaster is about to occur somewhere in the world. This is the natural way of life. However, I'm encouraged by all the unnatural things—grace, forgiveness and love.

It may take a little work, but resist being cynical (all right, I'll try too) and subscribe to the dark chocolate approach as much as possible. Seeing the best in this world (despite the natural law of atrophy) is a worthy goal and as I've mentioned before, conducive to creativity.

Allow things to inspire and move you deeply, respond with love, ride the energy and excitement all the way to the finished painting, end of a novel, successful presentation before the board of trustees, or the graphic design that earns a smile from your boss.

Living the dark chocolate life—seeing the best in things—seems almost as slushy and sentimental a notion as holding hands and singing Kumbaya, but let me argue that it is much more than observing subject matter in its best light, it is an appreciation of both the good and bad. And what more profound a commentary is there than observing life as if watching the film about a dark world penetrated here and there by love and concluding that you have witnessed art?

And what of everyday reality? Isn't it even more a masterpiece of drama, the natural redeemed by love—love, an unnatural force carried by the wind resembling embers, a force that is often fragile and fades, a force that grows and spreads?

Are you jaded or optimistic—a lover of life or a person that works to shed light on injustice? The dark chocolate perspective allows you to see the totality of the cause and feed off its aesthetics,

harnessing creative energy for the work that needs to be done.

Even if the subject is beyond any redeeming qualities, those that have come before and written about it, those that have committed their lives to improving a bad situation, and those that are moved by your attempts to right a wrong, *are* the encouragement and best light—your dark chocolate.

This all hinges on your ability to reconcile opposites. Yes, the ancient culture was brutal and tyrannical, but the archeologist finds incalculable riches, the museum goer witnesses splendor. The African lion kills the wildebeest, but the cubs are fed and another day of natural wonder comes to an end in a place of indescribable beauty. Can there be light without darkness? The answers are not so simple, are they?

Many prefer to see the world in black and white. The splendor and violence of the lion—what do you make of that? Can you look in the mirror and accept that you're a flurry of contradictions? And instead of hating yourself for your darker side, can you be whole? Can you be at peace knowing that some of your energy and best qualities come from your darker side?

I like to think of creativity sometimes as a pressure release valve for the hidden self, a way of managing and preventing negative tendencies from causing havoc. I think you've heard of the person who does everything they thought was ever expected from them, made great personal sacrifices, yet lived an unfulfilling existence and then one day explodes with rage with tragic consequences. Fortunately, this doesn't happen a lot. Many are wired to live a uninspired life with no ill result.

Before you spend too much time trying to formulate a systematic understanding of these things, why not let the absurdities and contradictions of life flow through you? You need this flow. It's the stuff that creativity is made of. Rather than trying to figure out why a particular character was killed off at the beginning of a novel—rather than obsessing about the appalling events that occur on page four, read the entire story and be moved by the whole instead of dismayed by its parts.

Although being a minimalist and wanting to add emphasis on simplicity is a sensible goal, beginning with complexity and being open to a universe of possibilities is a good way to arrive there. Start off with a lot of stuff and refine, refine, refine, polish, polish.

The web designer is often told to build a large robust website. He tells his client that he needs content. ‘*Content?*’ the client asks. ‘*Text, pictures, streaming video—you know—content,*’ the designer says with an incredulous expression. The light and dark of this world is your subject matter—your content, the muse for your creativity.

Suspend your judgment of life, your need for everything to make sense. Roll up your sleeves and get to work. Take all the content and begin to sculpt it into an expression of your vision.

One more word about the dark. Even Freud was somewhat frightened by the subconscious. He thought of it as primal forces—the cause of many problems. Even the word libido is used as a derogatory term by Freud, meaning a lust to unite and bind. His famous colleague, Carl Jung, went even deeper into what he called the collective unconscious of man, a place made up of humanity’s knowledge and filled with symbols.

Jung wasn’t as frightened by the dark and spoke of a shadow self that we all possess. With such powerful and mysterious energies inside of us, it’s not only reasonable that this is where our creativity might come from, but that if we can tap into it wisely, as with the discovery of fire, we can prepare a scrumptious meal without burning down the house.

Barring that you have an impulse control disorder, repressing something too painful to deal with without professional help, or have a genetic predisposition towards substance abuse at the first sign of any emotional discomfort, you should be able to explore and examine the mysteries hidden in your psyche—add a pinch of some dark chocolate and make something that represents a little of you and of mankind.

However, if you have the feeling that you’re not ready for such an adventure, consider all the great art ever created. There’s usually a story behind it, having something to do with disappointment and pain, a struggle or great realization about who we really are. Again, make wise decisions when entering the dark.

Rather than trying to cover pain with things that make us feel good, choosing immediate gratification, why not seek to more fully know ourselves? It’s worth considering the things we secretly obsess about—our sensual fascinations, our dreams of fame and fortune, our fears and defense mechanisms.

From a place of distance and detachment, we might find that the answers are not so much that we're bad people, but rather we're a universe of mystery, abundant with stories to tell, canvases to paint and ideas to unleash upon the world.

Finally, to consider darkness is simply to trust in what happens when you sleep. Some are actually afraid of the place that dreams and nightmares come from. Some are even more afraid of the deepest sleep stage of all which is typified by delta brain waves—a place of zero mind activity. You can liken it to being dead. Or perhaps you can take comfort in the fact that you come out of it every morning, you mind refreshed and maybe beaming with a new idea.

Don't be afraid of the dark. Embrace the unknown. Like magic—inventions, ideas and innovations emerge from that dark cavernous place inside ourselves we know little about. Trust the sleep portion of your life as well as all that you don't know about yourself.

Summary: Try to see the best in everything, even the darkness within. Contemplate the mystery of who you are

IMAGINING

## SECRET WORLD

*"It's weird not to be weird."*

— John Lennon

### ESCAPING ANTS

My wife is an elementary school teacher who happens to be of Chinese descent. One late August morning a little girl arrived on the first day of school, exceedingly nervous, that is, until she saw my wife and smiled.

I concluded that seeing an Asian teacher reminded the girl of her mother. Two *Homo sapiens* of similar ethnicities on Planet Earth. One afraid and comforted by the presence of the other. Appearances go a long way in making us feel secure.

It would be absurd to accuse an innocent child of racism, but helpful to note that we all judge the world based on external appearances. Our minds make associations, some positive, others negative.

Without discussing the role of xenophobia in human evolution or the drunk uncle with an irrational hatred of skinny people or some other demographic, let us postulate that our mental associations cause us to interpret the world in certain ways. That being said, let me tell you what it was like growing up in America after the Cuban



Revolution.

Between the ages of eight and thirteen, I moved in with my grandparents. My grandfather, Francisco, who was a former political prisoner in Cuba would listen to AM talk radio every morning, pace the living room and rant. I had no idea why he got so worked up listening to the news and commentaries.

Eventually I learned the truth about his experiences, namely that he had spent over a decade being tortured in a prison with subhuman conditions because of his allegiance to the former regime. Almost half a century later as the US begins to normalize relations with Cuba, I can almost sense my late grandfather's displeasure—the proverbial rolling in his grave.

As far as I'm concerned, the winds of change might bring profound benefits, possibilities and outcomes to the island nation. However, I wouldn't expect in most cases that those negatively affected by a revolution or their families to welcome friendship with a former enemy. Too much baggage, too many negative metal associations.

It's a natural response for people to behave and think a certain way based on the attitudes of those close to them. To reject family and friends may seem like rejecting a part of themselves. Some may even have the overwhelming sense that distancing oneself from their family or culture is somehow morally wrong. Sometimes it takes a new generation to soften their positions and views of the world.

Take for instance, the son of a World War II veteran who returns a Japanese flag taken as a war souvenir—a flag removed from the pocket of a dead Japanese serviceman. Personal messages from family members were written in the white space around the red sun, well wishes presented to a soldier at the time of deployment.

The father forbade the returning of the memento, but after his passing, the son makes the journey to Japan. In an emotional meeting, the Japanese family accept the flag as if the spirit of their fallen family member were returning home.

It's understandable that the bitterness too great to overcome in one generation is finally conquered by a son or daughter willing to forget and move on. So it is with any deviation from the norm. The crux of what I am getting at is that if you're part of a group, you will more than likely think the way the group does.

Anywhere in the world you go, you'll find people dressing,

behaving and thinking according to cultural standards and traditions. But every now and then, one little member of the ant colony escapes and finds an infinite horizon. Not so much in a rejection of society as a shift in consciousness.

*The one who follows the crowd will usually get no further than the crowd. The one who walks alone, is likely to find himself in places no one has ever been.*

—Albert Einstein

Before running out and quitting your job to go into seclusion and become a struggling/starving artist, please bear in mind that it is the way you perceive the world that determines how you detach from it. In other words, get with the program and allow your dreams to become a natural outgrowth of your life.

Andy Warhol was a successful commercial artist before he became the famous painter of soup cans. Jeff Koons was a commodities broker who eventually went on to become the most successful living artist. My point is that you don't have to drop everything and distance yourself from others to become a creative.

Slowly, over time, the artist within flowers, or as the old saying goes: bloom where you're planted. There may be times of intense self-promotion and the chasing of every opportunity, but there's no hurry. Don't sacrifice your peace of mind. The same goes for every discipline—writing, inventing, choreographing, etc.

Also, it's been noted that a person's happiness is often directly related to how many friends he or she has. Don't isolate yourself. If your differences separate you from everyone around you, learn to live with secrets. You should love others unconditionally, even if they can't do the same for you.

## DEPTH

Being a painter, composer or advertising executive is not about an identity, but the unfolding of creativity. If you've got bills to pay, customers to satisfy and a world of practical and unfulfilling concerns to deal with, keep in mind that your perceptions—underneath all the

noise and busyness of life—are evolving.

The question becomes, can you be like others on the outside, but secretly different on the inside? Can you take care of all the ‘real-world’ stuff and allow the virtuoso within to flourish? To think differently, one must be different. To have an imagination, one must live in a secret imaginary place.

That’s not to say that great effort and focus isn’t required in realizing your goals. However, while the attainment of skills and excellence is occurring, the best stuff is happening on the inside. Pablo Picasso once said, “It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.”

Without a deep inner life, your creative endeavors will lack vision. When people ask me what it takes to be a novelist, I usually respond by telling them that a few messy relationships are required—total heartbreak is even better. You can be a good writer without the pain, but as far as creativity goes, pain and difficulty are essential commodities.

You’ve heard it said that it’s all about the journey, not the destination. This is particularly true when it comes to being a creative person. Life is a song, a dance, an adventure. If you’re waiting for the day to come to be the next great technology entrepreneur or inventor, you’re missing out on life. Enjoy every moment as you refine your craft, mail your submissions and proposals, and collect your rejection letters.

Regarding rejection, always keep in mind that it’s never personal, it’s just a lot easier to create than to find people that understand and relate to you—the day of success and ultimate victory is just another day. It may even be a disappointing day if you find out that after the excitement wears off, that success isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, and soon you may be feeling out of sorts and restless until you realize that it’s the next project that will bring back the passion. Just don’t make the same mistake in believing that you need to hurry through it to reach the end.

If you crave recognition and acknowledgment, you should take the time to think about why these things are so important to you. What might you be trying to prove? Validation by others is an external phenomenon (*Much more on this in the final chapter*). Again, what is paramount is the inner world. Are you growing? Are your perspectives broadening? Are your perceptions finding more and

more complexity and contradictions in life and in yourself? Is your imagination as important to you as what you see when you look out the window?

## BEYOND POLARITY

F. Scott Fitzgerald, considered one of the greatest novelists of the twentieth century, could hardly find any work towards the end of his life, even to the point of pleading with filmmakers in Hollywood to believe him—that he was indeed a good writer.

In addition to proving the point that no matter how good you are, the world may not accept you during your lifetime, the quality of Fitzgerald's work pointed to a great inner depth and secret world. Most telling about this hidden self is the following quote: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."

Many creatives are able to enter this lonely territory of thinking differently than most of the people on earth. Remember the little ant I mentioned earlier who escaped from the colony—the shift in consciousness? A good place to begin in such a great escape is simply to note that the majority of people think in terms of black and white.

This either-or way of processing the world, or top-down method, causes all things to either support a world view or contradict it. What gets lost are the infinite shades of color that are not particularly black *or* white.

Not only is there a spectrum of color in life, but opposites that merge and become one. And just when you think you've got it all figured out, the rug is manifestly pulled out from under you. Faint laughter at the edge of the universe can be heard but quickly quiets down so you won't notice. The coyotes in the wilderness howl with more laughter, certain that you won't question their motives. You turn to the mirror and notice yourself, perhaps looking a little bit too serious. If you're very observant, you might realize that this has something to do with all the laughter.

However if you persist with your need for things to make sense,

you'll find that you'll be following the herd for the rest of your days, assuming that someone in the crowd knows where they're going. But as you do this, slowly and inevitably the disillusionment with life will appear like rain. You'll find that despite your best efforts, few things quite turn out as you thought.

This attachment to polarity—black and white thinking—is counterproductive and limits us in seeing the infinite possibilities inherent in every matter.

Suppose you become a member of an institution that you considered perfect in every way. What happens when you discover the countless shades of imperfections woven together to make this institutional tapestry? Your initial thought was correct, *it is* perfect, but in all its glorious imperfection (The same might be said for human relationships).

Assuming that you indeed want to be secretly different from others, reject the notions that you have all the answers and everything is as simple as black and white. You'll be well on your way to finding *many* answers. But you may have already deduced as much.

If you're an artist, composer, entrepreneur or inventor, over time it becomes apparent that you're not so interested in moving with the crowd, partaking in small talk and frequenting the trendy hotspots. Your craft, whatever it might be, is your life. With Zen-like focus, you dedicate yourself to the process of creativity without a care for what you might be missing out on in the external world of fads, trends and other superficialities.

As you spend time with your craft, skills are developed—the skills that will help you express yourself. How can you ever find happiness and satisfaction apart from expressing who you really are? Dedication and attainment of skills are the road to self-discovery, transformation, contentment and purpose.

Once more, your craft *is* your life. Other than love for others, no award, recognition or achievement will ever be more satisfying than living out each day, immersed in your secret world, contemplating eternal mysteries, conceiving, inventing and making.

*But wait—why all this secrecy? Why not live brazenly, opposing the status quo for all to see? I don't know about this secret life. It's just not me.*

You can be as much as a spectacle as you want, a flamboyant

Lady Gaga or raving Salvador Dali. But as you find a place of infinite stillness within, searching the ocean floor for an idea, it's probably helpful to note that defending your opinions and all the internal mysteries you are laboring to understand requires a great deal of personal energy, not to mention making you difficult to employ or accept as a family member (It's not your friend or family member's fault if they reject you, they're merely being normal).

If you really wish to be that translucent, protecting your point of view and explaining to all what your intuition or imagination is like, please keep in mind that it might rob you of precious creative resources. Pick your times for fiery soapbox speeches carefully, acquiesce to behave as the herd out of respect and politeness. If you've achieved financial and social independence, then you can detach from society and wear a chicken costume the rest of your life, if that's what you really want.

## **AVOID THE CRASH**

The Franciscan and Buddhist monks and all those searching for enlightenment are coveting the very thing you already have as a creative: to be one with the thing we do. In many ways, those that search for some deeper intimacy with the infinite are envious of you, the artist, dreamer, doer. As mentioned before, it is the deeper inner life that's important, but the development of skills and practices required to be a creative person are essential as its nourishment.

So why do we as creative people feel anything but enlightened? If you look into the lives of very successful people, whether it's in business or the arts, you'll often find that once they reach the symbolic summit of their chosen field, they inevitably ask, 'is this all there is?'

Part of what makes us seekers and dreamers is what has been referred to as a divine discontent. Many highly intelligent people obsess, deconstruct the world and try to fill an empty void within them.

Some of the greatest ideas and works of art were birthed into this world by individuals that struggled to manage their emotions. Some were kind, others unkind. Some realized that their art was their joy, and others perhaps only too late.

## IMAGINING

Whether my paintings and novels are considered good or bad art, whether I was never more than a mediocre product designer at the corporation I worked at in my thirties and forties, along the way I found that the work accomplished inside of me was of utmost consequence.

The highs and lows taught me how to sever the chord that tied me to negative emotions. And surprisingly enough, I found that I was much more productive and creative after learning to stay on an even keel.

*But aren't emotions where we get our creative energy? What is art without passion?*

As we began in the book, people are inspired by the things we love. Love is not an emotion. Emotions fluctuate. Love is steadfast and constant. It is a way of being. It is a state of consciousness.

Being a slave to extreme emotions may make it difficult for you to be creative or may even keep you from creating altogether. You may ride an initial excitement high towards significant output, but in the long run, the eventual crash will take a long time to recover from.

Summary: Escape the herd. Know that your inner development is of paramount importance. The outer is the overflow of the inner.





## THE LOW ROAD & OTHER CURIOUS THINGS

*“You are perfectly cast in your life. I can't imagine anyone  
but you in the role. Go play.”*

— Lin-Manuel Miranda

I once took an online creativity test. One of the questions had to do with driving. I was asked if I always took the same route to work or if I was the type of person that always searched for alternate roads. I thought to myself, *I think I know where this is going.*

If I'm correct, implied in the question was the view that a person who is always searching and never satisfied is more creative. I couldn't disagree more. I'm of the opinion that the creative person uses his best judgment to select the perfect way to get to work and never has to spend any more time or mental energy considering this, thus allowing him more time to daydream and engage in problem solving as he or she is driving to work.

Once an efficient method or pattern is established, the mind is free to question what the roads are made of—are they real? Can a fictional character be tangible enough to cast shadows on the road? Can the road be put into a novel with all its qualities, or rather, can the reader be made to imagine the road as real?

The software engineer might be able to visualize a way to write a

conditional statement so that multiple problems can be addressed while a webpage user fills out a form. A business development director may come to the realization that his staff needs to do customer support as well as training instead of splitting up the work between two departments.

A creative should never waste time. Try to eliminate anything that might bog you down in the details. If you're a painter, don't obsess about paints and brushes. I once heard of an artist who spent months and thousands of dollars getting his studio ready, but once he was finished, couldn't actually think of anything to paint. If you're a technical person, you may understand this even better.

As I write this, it seems we are still in the dark ages of computing. Most projects require much time and effort to execute. The software and programming languages created to assist you often seem unintuitive and needlessly complex.

An idea for a web page that should take minutes to create requires hours of graphic design, coding and responsive scheming to get it to display correctly on every screen size, operating system and device. Until the era of quantum computing arrives, these headaches are unavoidable, unless you have the technical ability to modify templates someone else has created.

Whether you're a novelist, business person or visual artist, the details must always be avoided and saved for later. When the idea comes, like a newborn baby, it should be fed and taken care of. Immediate concerns should not involve long-term details such as the child's retirement account. In the same way, an idea needs to be expressed swiftly and efficiently without worrying about the future.

When the idea presents itself, the painter needs to sketch it quickly, not commit to paint and canvas unless the mind has formed a clear image of the finished work or the goals one wishes to be accomplish.

If you're a concert pianist, your goal is to interpret great works of classical music. Technique and attention to detail is of paramount importance. However, if you're a *composer* of classical music, the creative act will be a messy and sloppy affair. When the ideas need to come, throw technique and excellence out the window. Some of the best ideas have been written on napkins. Creativity is not pretty—it's practical.

Obviously, these guidelines don't apply if you're involved in

something purely experimental. Knowing what your goals are and seeing them in your mind's eye is a different form of creativity altogether. If the clouds have not yet parted and the fiery darts of creativity haven't pierced your physical veil, rejoice, you may be on the verge of something grand.

Getting your hands dirty and wrestling with the clay, pounding on the piano or typing your stream of consciousness into a blank manuscript may be the process that awakens your imagination. But again, if the idea comes, capture it quickly, carelessly if needed.



A painting instructor once told me that I should abandon all technique. I think his advice went along the lines of the Picasso quote about taking a lifetime to paint like a child. Besides this guidance feeling quite liberating, it caused a shift in the way I view the visual arts.

Ever since, I've been perpetually on guard against learning or discovering 'correct' ways of doing things. Let me give you a silly analogy. Would you rather own a painting executed in sixty seconds by Keith Haring or a portrait painted in a classical style by a living artist who happens to be a graduate of a prestigious fine art academy? I'll give you a hint, one is worth significantly more than the other.

The classically trained artist may be commissioned to paint a portrait of a diplomat or CEO, but the misfits that continue to redefine art are the ones making history. This was even true back in the time of the impressionists. The great Victorian painters were creating works that were truly awe-inspiring, astounding on every technical level. But it was the impressionists—the Van Goghs and Monets that gave us the most treasured art of the time.

That's not to say that one can't create work of tremendous detail and technical skill. However, it might be good to remember that there are no creativity police to come and drag you away if you don't do something 'correctly.' Not only is there no correct way to do things, there is no workflow or method to making, inventing, creating and composing.

The foremost and most influential rock band in history, The Beatles, were known for the songwriting duo of John Lennon and Paul McCartney. Although their song credits were labeled Lennon/McCartney, they wrote separately, each song a strange manifestation that emerged from deep within the individual. One composition could start with the music, another with the words. Fortunately, no one followed any particular rules.

Think of a cloud. Have you ever seen an incorrectly shaped cloud? Simply being aware of the background clutter and disorder in the thing you are trying to create can actually make it more beautiful.

I've long been fascinated by Asian art, particularly paintings on wood. The grain patterns of the wood can often be seen through the pigments of paint, frequently playing an important role in the composition. Sometimes the negative space of a painting is mostly the wood panel itself, lightly covered in a soft hue.

What I find even more interesting is the lack of color in many Chinese paintings. It is an attempt to get to the life force of the subject. Monochromatic mountains and mist, mysterious landscapes and unassuming bamboo renderings—all what might be considered in the west as dull and not very colorful, yet undeniably beautiful.

I would like to introduce you to a possibly troubling thought: The things of this world of highest quality and genius may only be appreciated by the few (at least during the period it's created).

I attended an outdoor concert one night. After the first couple of songs, the singer asked the crowd if they would prefer to listen to his most heartfelt songs filled with meaning and profundity, or would they rather listen to the frivolous stuff.

After the people cheered and indicated their approval of the latter option, he rephrased his question. "Do you want me to take the high road, or the low road?" He repeated this a few times until the crowd was chanting in unison. "Low road—low road—low road!"

There are many other examples that come to mind when it comes to the low road phenomenon: Poor ticket sales for Academy Award winning movies. The success of attractive and charismatic

pop stars over brilliant avant-garde classical composers and people who are regarded as geniuses, but on the whole unheard of by the masses.

Or for that matter, the popular obsession with reality show stars, and the indifference towards those who start non-profit organizations or stay awake at night trying to come up with ways to help children living in poverty or homeless veterans.

Shallow culture? Not so fast. The average person is overworked and underpaid, exhausted and weighed down by debt and responsibilities. A pretty face on a television screen might just be the guilty pleasure a person needs to escape for a little while and forget the world.

As creative people, we *are* sometimes guilty of being the brooding, arrogant stereotype. In taking ourselves too seriously, we might succeed in touching on weighty matters, but actually lose perspective. The big picture includes the tragedy as well as the comic relief, the profound as well as the superficial. Life is serious *and* trivial.

William Shakespeare wrote plays for the commoners. Today, we consider his plays and sonnets high art, as if divinity itself were pointing out all that is fascinating and enthralling about human nature. But 400 years ago, it was simply a gift of entertainment for anyone that wanted to attend the Globe Theatre, paying as little as a penny.

Did Bill take the low road? Maybe.

But perhaps in not taking himself too seriously, he was better able to present universal themes to his audience.

*But wait, I'm a fine cuisine type of person. I'm not into burgers and fries!*

First, know your audience. Then create according to what you need to express in order to satisfy your artistic sensibilities. Do this as unpretentiously as possible. To set out to make a masterpiece can be recipe for disaster. But not always.

Bruce Springsteen has stated that when he recorded the Born to Run album, he sensed that his musical career was coming to an end. The record company had changed management and all the signs seemed to indicate that they would not be promoting his music much longer. What resulted was a frantic, obsessive compulsive effort to

craft the best sound recordings he and his band were humanly capable of.

*"I wanted to make the greatest rock record that I'd ever heard, and I wanted it to sound enormous and I wanted it to grab you by your throat and insist that you take that ride, insist that you pay attention, not to just the music, but just to life, to feeling alive, to being alive."*

—Bruce Springsteen

Much bigger than the kick in the butt incentive of a deadline is the prospect of completely falling off the precipice of your career. I prefer to believe that although Springsteen took his work very seriously, he remained humble and at some level understood that his very life depended on greatness.

## THE STRANGE & CURIOUS

Do your best earnestly and most importantly, be relatable to others. That is, unless you're audience enjoys the challenge of contemplating strange and confusing things.

When I write novels, I sometimes sprinkle a pinch of magical realism with a dash of Kafkaesque flavoring and maybe a few squibs here and there of social commentary. I think my readers also understand that life can sometimes be bizarre and absurd and complex. I don't expect anyone to be having an existential crisis to enjoy my stories. But most people appreciate a little confusion and mystery.

If you've ever been to a modern art exhibit, you may have thought to yourself, *'my, isn't that the strangest thing I've ever seen?'* You may even consider contemporary paintings and sculpture to be nothing more than deliberate attempts at strangeness. Let me remind you that art is a reflection of our culture—and we live in a strange one.

Take, for instance...everyday life. Most people don't question the workings of society—a third of life absorbing and being absorbed by media, a third of life sleeping, and a third of life working. We work to pay back student loans and eventually a mortgage for a house

that, with interest, will cost three times the amount of the sale after thirty years.

During that time, the stress of career, family and debt, along with toxic comfort foods affect our health. Physicians prescribe medications, supposedly with the understanding that the benefits will outweigh all the dangers. The medications have side effects, requiring more medications to treat new health conditions. The body develops a tolerance to the meds and higher dosages are needed.

The miserable patient devours more comfort food loaded with low-quality inexpensive soy oil and dangerous amounts of sugar and sodium. Eventually the body and mind aren't what they used to be. Finally, in old age, an assisted living facility is needed so that medications can be administered around the clock. That is, if family members can afford the astronomical price. The same applies to rehab for those with substance abuse problems—usually prescription pain killers. This is life.

The world is indeed strange. With the exception of the genetic freak who can eat junk, drink, smoke and live until they're one hundred—most people face serious health challenges during their lifetimes. Add the needless mental suffering brought on by the complexity of our culture and you can almost hear the cries of pain echoing across the lands.

Many an artist have expressed either rage, disbelief or bewilderment, sensing that the reality of human existence is absurd. Even in a part of the world that is not experiencing the effects of war and is abundant with prosperity, it must be said: We can do better than this.

Maybe that's why so much art is strange. But the subconscious mind, or collective unconsciousness or the big question mark at the bottom of the ocean is more than a match for this, and maybe, even stranger. It doesn't need gravity or electromagnetism, intellect, respiration or digestion, words or pictures.

When an idea pops into your head, it's almost as if a suggestion has been transmitted to you from another dimension. As if to say, *I've been watching you try to solve this problem with your tiny human mind. May I offer you something that might help? I've been looking at the puzzle from a different angle and I see something you don't.*

Instantly, something pierces your mind. Faster than the speed of thought, you form a picture or some association that gives it

meaning. If you don't take yourself too seriously, you'll find that it is playful and fun.

Music is probably the best example. If you listen to a violin concerto by Antonio Vivaldi, you'll find an exquisite arrangement of notes that mean absolutely nothing. They may convey emotions or even be written about social or political concerns, but the notes themselves are just beautiful sounds.

Out beyond the sphere of human drama, there is laughter, amusement and diversion. In your all too serious search for the meaning of life and the grand unifying theory of everything, consider the possibility that this universe may have been created for dabbling paint on a canvas, telling jokes, traveling, singing, sports, encouraging others and making love.

Above all, loosen your mental associations of what things might mean and instead long to be an expression of the here and now.

*'There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.'*

—Albert Einstein

Try to imagine the ultimate experience, realization or moment of uttermost fulfillment. You can give it a name such as enlightenment, nirvana, transcendence or an awakening. Contemplating such an abstract concept may bring to mind a kind of emotional high or rapturous mind-body connection or absorption into the infinite, perhaps even meeting God.

But what if I told you that examining the edge of a piece of paper, feeling the skin on your face, listening to a sound or pushing your finger against a hard object is just as miraculous, awe-inspiring and remarkable?

Obviously, most of us don't have the ability to fully appreciate the everyday and walk around in a perpetual state of amazement. But let's face it—it's probably a very practical thing to be oblivious to the plethora of content we encounter. In the same way that the conscious mind doesn't concern itself with breathing and the beating of the heart, unimportant memories are discarded and present



moment awareness is limited. Otherwise, we would all suffer from information overload.

However, it would serve us well to remember that our three dimensional and possibly holographic universe is at all times astounding beyond our comprehension. Keeping this thought at the back of your mind gives one a most peculiar perspective—one that might produce a bounce in your step and an inclination toward frequent inspiration.

The easiest way, as we eluded to before, is to travel the world with new sights and sounds triggering a heightened state of awareness. But seeing *everything* with fresh eyes is the most powerful method of having your muse present at all times. Not only would your eyes be opened, piercing the veil of reality and seeing the splendor of life, but you would also notice how odd everything is.

We're not considering the wave lengths and the arrangement of atoms, purely the 'suchness' or 'is-ness' of everything. In observing such suchness, you may find that logic breaks down and much of the universe takes on a quality of impulses and expressions—the craving of one human to push their lips against another human—the desire for another human to leave behind a legacy and be remembered, at least for one, maybe two generations.

The practical concerns for survival and procreation are replaced by the nonessential things—jewelry, charisma, hobbies, causes, smart devices, fame, awards, and social networking, to name a few. Add the truly unnecessary things for our survival and you end up with art, poetry, dance and many of the creative pursuits that some would argue are the most important things humans do.

A creative person essentially preserves their childlike quality of play. Yes, the everyday matters of most importance need to be taken care of, but ultimately it's all about the play. You can liken it to the enormous logistical challenges before a sporting event or concert. Equipment needs to be moved. Attorneys need to take care of the legalese. Accountants need to balance the books. Promoters need to market and get the word out, make arrangements for parking, food—and so on. But in the end, what mattered most was the note the singer hit at the end of a song or the actor's well delivered line.

You don't need the Fettuccine Alfredo to be delicious in order to survive. What your body requires is food with certain nutrients and amino acids. Sublime tastiness is inconsequential. If you're a

psychologist, you might add love, belonging and self-esteem. Throw in Maslowian self-actualization, and we've arrived at imagining all the way up at the top of the pyramid of unnecessary needs.

It may be impossible to peel back layers of reality and perceive a world in which existence is miraculous and the trivialities, play and silliness of life are of paramount importance, but acknowledging the possibility that these things may indeed be true can expand your conscious awareness. At least find a balance between the practical and things that make life special.

Now that I have contended that imagination and creativity, art, play, mischief and fun may be the highest of human endeavors and quite possibly the most important things, don't take it all too seriously. It *is* possible to give art too much significance.

If you've had any experience with the quest for inspiration, you have no doubt become acquainted with the big question mark at the bottom of the ocean frowning upon hubris with torturing silence. As G. K. Chesterton once said, 'Angels fly because they take themselves lightly.'

The same can be said about having a childlike sense of wonder. Once you have a different attitude about play, you'll find that not only will you soar with the angels, all your senses will awaken fully.

With such heightened awareness you'll discover that there is no difference between ordinary reality and the miraculous. Until your defining moment, or the time that some metaphysical breakthrough arrives or all your answers appear or even the most heartfelt dream unfolds, please notice that life is already beautiful.

Summary: Chase greatness if you have to, but don't take yourself too seriously.

## IMAGINING

## THE PENDULUM

*“No great mind has ever existed without a touch of madness.”*

— Aristotle

*“Mad Hatter: ‘Why is a raven like a writing-desk?’*

*‘Have you guessed the riddle yet?’ the Hatter said, turning to Alice again.*

*‘No, I give it up,’ Alice replied: ‘What’s the answer?’*

*‘I haven’t the slightest idea,’ said the Hatter”*

— Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

The big question mark at the bottom of the ocean lies miles deep in dark freezing water, or at least that’s as good a guess as any since it’s a mystery. Because of the rascally nature of the human ego, it’s awfully tempting to say, *well—I know what and where it is*. But don’t be in such a hurry to come up with a theory.

Embracing mystery allows for a floodgate of possibilities to emerge. Starting with an assumption may hinder your creative search unless you have amazing powers of intuition.

An admission that we’re still in the dark ages of human

knowledge may be a good starting place for us. *What about our technological achievements?* You might ask. Someone may even become upset and announce, “*Don’t you tell me that we’re dumb. Show me a problem—I’ll figure it out, dammit!*”

Rather than tell you all that’s wrong with the world and list human shortcomings, let me point out that when a writer, inventor or business person is zapped by a idea while taking a shower, they may be excited or even grateful for the flash of insight—but most assuredly—completely at a loss where the thought came from.

When it comes to creativity, we are essentially in the dark, tinkering with unknowns and hoping to get lucky. Just as most discoveries and inventions happen by accident, the average thought may or may not involve a great deal of ruminating, yet most certainly it catches us by surprise.

If you’re familiar with analog equipment, old TV’s and transistor radios, sometimes the darn things just wouldn’t function. The ‘expert’ would show up, bang on it a few times and viola, a clear television channel or radio transmission.

What is actually happening is that the vibrations are causing electronic parts to make contact again, thus ‘fixing’ the problem. The person rapping on the side of something doesn’t particularly care which power source restored its connection to which terminal.

In the same way, we don’t need to get in a submarine and dive to the ocean floor to measure the big question mark or take a selfie with it. However, let me point out, that if you do happen to attach a cable and bring it up to the surface, please put this book down immediately and get to work curing diseases and ending wars.

Still here? Okay, what I would like to introduce at this point is a way of banging on our heads to get the genius connection going. Not literally, although there is such a thing as tapping (Emotional Freedom Techniques), which in my opinion is nothing more than a placebo. Hey, but if it works, joy and long life to you.

Oh yeah—banging on our heads. As we’ve mentioned before, the still mind brings serenity and well-being. The stormy mind brings anxiety, depression all kinds of mental suffering. Somewhere in between is the composed daydreaming mind, balanced between peace and full blown mental chaos. This balance is not a perfect equilibrium, it collides between the two extremes, causing debris to litter the corridor.

As you're writing a novel, painting a mural or involved in a different creative pursuit, you are in essence tethering a rope around your waist and exploring the madness of emotion and mental activity without falling into the abyss. Minus the rope or harness, the daydreams turn into wrathful ruminations or useless obsessing.

You can swing on the rope back into the safety of your placid mind and then venture out into dreams and nightmares. As you do this, the pieces of reality and fantasy tumble next to each other, forming patterns. The patterns sometimes take on a 'that hits the spot' type of elegance (or strangeness).

*"The most exciting phrase to hear in science, the one that heralds new discoveries, is not 'Eureka!' but 'That's funny...'"*

—Isaac Asimov

This needs to be applied to the totality of your waking life. The creative person's imagination shouldn't be active for solely a specific time of the day, but left on and running like a refrigerator (you don't want certain things to go bad—good ideas to spoil). Always have a way of writing your ideas down, sloppily and hastily if needed. Try to include as much detail as you can, since you might forget later.

One technique that works well for me is using the voice to text feature of the email app on my phone. Later, when sitting at my desk I can go through my inbox reading messages from one of my favorite contributors and collaborators—me.

## **DARK TO LIGHT**

If you're like many people, you spend a considerable amount of time watching the news, disturbed by events and fretting about politics. You may have an active social life and find yourself preoccupied with matters having to do with family and friends. And/or, your career consumes much of your thoughts, including the image you wish to project, how well you are received, and whether you are succeeding and moving towards your goals.

There are enough things to keep you perpetually in a state of

self-absorption. This may be one of the reasons why people search for distractions—entertainment, sex, alcohol, etc.—ways to switch off the inner torment.

At some point, often in midlife, a person may seek a spiritual or intellectual solution. The search is then turned away from externals and inward. However, this is no longer self-absorption, but a hope the answers lie somewhere beyond the false self and whatever attachments have been formed to the world of unfulfilling pleasures.

Although a leap of faith may catapult many into a more satisfying realm of living in both religious and secular circles, whether it be altruism or the study of sacred texts or the cosmos, artists eventually sense that there is something yet deeper that nothing can capture or explain.

It's worthy to note that creative people venture precariously close to polarities, sometimes achieving magnificent things, but other times facing great inner battles. Perhaps it's the maddening realization that they're perpetually on the verge of a great discovery, knowing all too well its exact nature is undefinable.

So they turn to symbols, metaphors, notes, clay, leaps and pirouettes, brushstrokes, or the possibility of inventing something—to get a tiny bit closer to finding catharsis, closure, healing, relief and perhaps a divine form of love.

An author may find that it takes them many years to recover from personal trauma before they can write about it. A young musician may work out his own inner conflicts rapidly as he's composing a song, only half aware that his or her subconscious is flowing out into lyrics and melodies.

As stated before, we should take ourselves lightly. But our imaginary worlds can be quite meaningful. Art is a profound reflection of reality. Think of when you're watching a film on the edge of your seat. The suspense captivates you far beyond your willful suspension of disbelief.

Fiction in some regards is as real and as momentous as our everyday reality. And what is reality, but a type of edge of your seat drama? We observe with great concern and wonder what will be the fate of loved ones—the medical prognosis—the legal verdict. Life is a fascinating comedy, tragedy and romance.

The creative process is an extension of life, filled with the conscious, unconscious, real and imaginary. You can regard the

icons on your phone as things that aren't real, dismissing them as the design of some graphic artist in a cubicle somewhere—simply shapes and colors.

Nevertheless, symbols and what they represent are of great value to us. If you've ever been brought to tears of joy by selecting an email icon, you understand.

All around us are exquisitely designed things. The furniture, appliances, gadgets and fashion accessories are all the result of countless hours of creative expression and refinement by talented people.

I've always been amazed at how automobiles are engineered and encapsulated in what appears to be liquid metal as if crafted by makers of a samurai amour. I'm even more amazed knowing that cars are assembled by robots, carrying out the biddings of the human imagination.

Even the dulllest television program is birthed into existence by talented behind the scenes people. Model makers, carpenters, riggers, set designers, directors, camera operators, lighting and sound engineers all work together create programming of such quality that we don't question anything about a production. So the writing wasn't that great—the making of the show exceeds our standards of quality, otherwise the bricks would fly!

When I was nineteen, I was acutely aware of this condition that is common to man—the struggle to appreciate. I was in the Vatican Museum looking up at the Michelangelo's frescoes on the Sistine Ceiling.

I had, with great interest, studied the famous works of art in library books filled with color plates. My trip to Italy was partly motivated by my love with Michelangelo and knowing that the plates were inadequate in conveying something so grand.

Anyone who has seen a famous painting for the first time will tell you that it is similar to spotting a celebrity. The brush with fame is strangely fascinating. However, as with most things that involve expectation, I needed more.

Having traveled across the Atlantic and coming face to face with the height of human artistic achievement, I wanted to be overwhelmed. Where were the tears streaming down my cheeks? Where were the goosebumps and the chill down my spine?

I stood and looked up at the ceiling asking myself, will I ever be



here again? Am I fully appreciating this moment? Do I need to grab some lunch to be in a better mood?

Yes, it was amazing to see the work by a master, the melodic contours and movement—the human form expressing a symphony in oil and plaster. There was no doubt in my mind that I was observing genius and greatness, but I also knew this wouldn't be one of the peak experiences of my life.

Over time I've come to realize that most of life is art, whether it's street art or lowbrow art scoffed at by critics or everyday life. In the movie *Sid and Nancy*, the couple is kissing by a garbage dumpster with trash raining down on them in slowmo to sound of guitar strumming. We would tend to think of two heroin addicts in the squalor of filth and despair as the last thing that could be considered beautiful. Yet, somehow, the scene is compelling, heartbreaking and lovely.

If you would like to try an experiment some time, play a video of a person walking down a street or driving a car, turn down the audio and add your own soundtrack. If you choose a moving symphonic composition heavy with strings, you might be surprised what kind of mood the video seems to take on. You may start to see the person in a different light, perhaps imagining a dark and painful past or epic challenge to be faced. Switch your soundtrack to a different type of music and the meaning and mood of the video will also change.

There are many ways to bang on your head. Knowing that our attitudes and perceptions create the reality around us is an important realization every creative person should become familiar with. Venturing into the dark and then to the light, and back and forth, causes reality to splinter and fragment.

A creative person works with pieces—preferably many small pieces—rather than monumental concepts and perceptions. Deconstructing and breaking down what we long ago considered established norms is a way of turning noise into notes and arranging colors to mix.

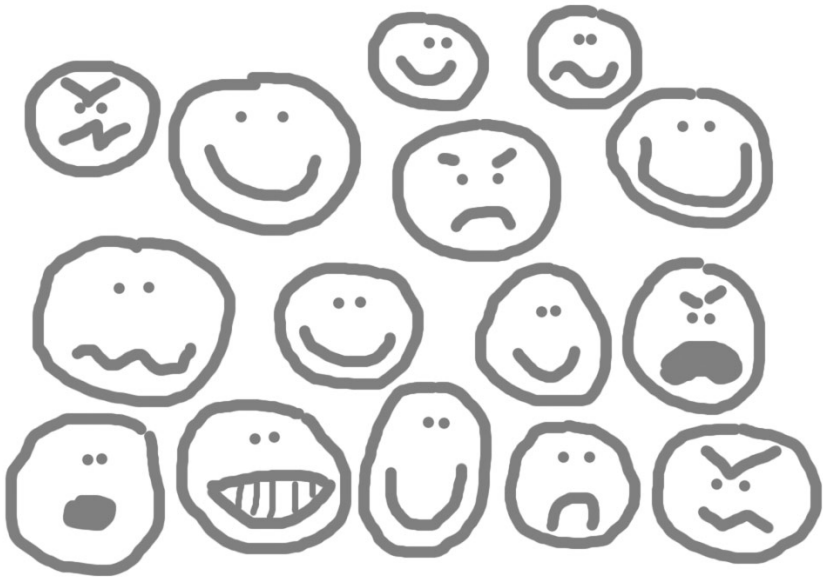
## CAPTIONS FOR LIFE

There are many things in life that we regard as constants. We cling to ideas and world views in order to establish with some confidence

certain things about the world we live in. However, when using our imaginations to create, we must abandon our preconceptions. Whether we are aware of it or not, we're constantly viewing the world according to our associations.

An obvious example is spotting someone that reminds us of an unkind person from our past. It requires effort to see past outward appearance and wipe our minds of judgment, contempt and unease. The same can be said about subconscious likes and dislikes.

Let's bang on our heads some more. Here's a drawing of some smileys and frownies.



Think of a caption for this group such as dentists. You may have no difficulty in labeling the group *dentist* since from personal experience you've found there are different kinds of dentists with diverse personality traits.

Try another. How about accountants? Sure, you may not know that many accountants, but certainly there must be happy, grumpy, pleasant and unpleasant number-crunchers in this world. But what if you dislike lawyers...or bankers...or police officers and judge them a certain way? Can you still add the caption to these faces?

Or what about hipsters or 'the rich?' Can you do the same with the words conservatives, moderates or liberals? Try writing the

caption, The Irish. Look at the faces for a moment. Erase the word and write Hispanics. Now let's try Buddhists. Look at all the silly facial expressions—happy, sad, angry and perplexed. Keep erasing and trying different captions on for size—Hindus, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Taoists, Zoroastrians.

Continue with the experiment. Use the caption, Russians. Study the faces for a moment, erase and write Americans, and then try a few more nationalities. Think of your own groups. Are there any religions, ethnicities you feel strongly about? Gender? Age?

The same applies to topics, places and inanimate objects. You'll find that on some level your mind has made many associations that generalize instead of seeing variety. When creating, the artist, inventor and entrepreneur must see beyond the solid colors and the monolithic.

Just as the physicist is aware of the molecules, atoms and subatomic particles that make up what appears to be a wall or a table, the creative should accept the world to be abundant with movement, energy, multiplicity and possibilities.

You have heard the expression *having an open mind* to describe being open to experience and accepting of differing points of view. To unleash the imagination, arrive at an idea and create something requires much more than being willing to consider alternate ways of perceiving the world.

We must figuratively bang on our heads, shake out the cobwebs and watch our mental associations and preconceptions collapse into rubble. The juxtaposition of opposites, absurd musings and fantasies, the things that don't quite fit—infinite combinations and permutations are beckoning.

Think of how many songs have been written using twelve musical notes—how many portraits have been painted using only red, yellow and blue and mixing them to produce orange, green and purple. To create, one must work with parts and not totalities, elements and not simplistic understandings of the workings of life and the universe.

It's a tantalizing proposition to seek, find and claim to have a big picture view of the world. However, creative depth comes from an understanding that the characters in the novel are as complicated as most people are, simultaneously good, bad, selfish and generous. The song can be bittersweet and the comedian's ingenious insight

both ridiculous and profound, the photograph—both beautiful and distressing.

Humans have a tendency toward simplistic associations that last lifetimes or even generations. Every so often someone stumbles upon irrefutable evidence that they've been wrong about something. After the shock wears off, they might hear their own voices whispering to themselves—they weren't evil, simply ignorant. The grass *isn't* greener on the other side. I thought revenge would make everything better. I thought everyone was cheating everyone else. I was wrong.

However, what is much more likely to occur is confirmation bias—our desperate attempt to prove ourselves to be right, even when presented with facts. Discovering that we are in error can actually have the strange effect of making us even more adamant in our way of thinking, usually choosing emotional conviction over logic.

The creative or inventor should be able to quickly discard erroneous ideas or concepts and move quickly toward the next possible thought or solution. Thomas Edison, who teachers said was too stupid to learn anything, invented the lightbulb after 1,000 failed attempts. I can imagine Edison calmly dismissing every catastrophe as an acceptance that being wrong is simply a way of life.

Whether it's our egos or insecurities, insistence on being right causes us to exclude the thousands possible solutions we need to make something out of nothing. Observing reality from different angles, questioning everything and looking for exceptions to rules is the type of banging on our heads needed to see what few have ever been able to see.

Having said that, we need to bang on our heads some more with an opposite perspective. As we allow the ourselves to question and analyze, there is also a need to keep an unprobing mind, seeing things as a visitor to an art museum would. This constant emptying and filling the mind—mental stillness and thought—allows the imagination to work in a similar manner as AC generator, where conductors pass through opposite magnetic fields.

When I'm lost in compulsive thinking, I'll sense the need to meditate. And when I've been meditating for a while, I'll find that it's the best time to begin working on a problem.

The term meditation, is unfortunate, since it has nothing to do

with contemplating or meditating upon anything. It is simply a resting of the mind—medicine for the brain, if you will. As I mentioned before, sleep is even better.

It is believed that during dreamless delta sleep, a person recovers from stress as the mind and body are restored. Brain cells shrink up to 60% when you sleep, clearing away unused synaptic connections in order to create space for new ones.<sup>ii</sup> It goes without saying that you'll be sharper having caught some z's. Sleep or at least try to quiet your mind.

But before you join a meditation cult, be leery of the so called spiritual master dangling a carrot in front of you and urging you toward ultimate enlightenment. Just to let you in on a little secret, there's no such thing, if by enlightenment you mean having everything figured out and arriving at some level of perfection. Or as the English philosopher, Alan Watts, once said, "The great realization is that there is nothing to realize."

You can spend a fortune attending seminars or traveling to India in search of a personal guru, but all the systematic doctrine, traditions and teaching can only confirm that you lack contentment and are confusing the artistic longing for self-expression with conquering, dissecting and labeling existence.

Many that find themselves closer to inner peace (not enlightenment) by curing their compulsive thinking and unbinding themselves from excessively emotional states seek to eliminate thinking and feeling altogether. They reason that it is necessary for the annihilation of the ego. Since this is impossible (because the ego is only an illusion), a person often gives up and becomes discouraged with their failure at emotional freedom and liberation from the mind.

It is the noisy mind, with all its reverie and drama that produces correct and incorrect opinions as well as gibberish. It is the still mind that essentially rolls its eyes, sighs and starts to look at the fragments. Somewhere between madness and peace, the big question mark at the bottom of the ocean stirs to life like an underwater volcano and blasts forth an idea.



It is often thought that the attainment of balance is the wisest and noblest of pursuits. You may even know some that have ventured to the peaks and valleys of extremes, often to their own detriment and peril. Logically, one could conclude that the cure for emotional unbalance, fanaticism, apathy, workaholism, slothfulness and self-centeredness is to move toward a neutral center.

Yet, extremes are actually quite normal, as is breathing. An inhalation peaks when the lungs fill with air. The exhalation reaches an opposite extreme when the lungs empty. To find a balance between inhalation and exhalation would be to stop breathing and suffocate.

The wisest thing to do would be to accept the swinging of the pendulum but without the wild ride. A gentle back and forth is healthier than violent fluctuations. When writing, painting, designing and innovating, one must feel something, but then detach from emotions—daydream, but then step outside the dream.

## SEX

One must also be in touch with their sexual energies—feminine thought, conception, caring and listening, as well as masculine action, desire and appreciation of beauty.

Did you catch that? Women listen and men are visually oriented (I'm leaving out an entire spectrum of gender identity for the sake of simplicity). Much of life is made up of yin and yang. If you don't allow yourself an ebb and flow between the two, you'll be stuck in one, essentially holding your breath.

Many are either completely unable to allow the gentle inhalation and exhalation, or have penchant toward glorifying one or demeaning the other. Some prefer that their theology, ideologies, politics and business reflect a macho-tough guy-masculine worldview.

Others berate the masculine and associate men with violence, callousness and lack of refinement and taste. Similarly, the misogynists view women with scorn, considering all feminine forms of governments and institutions as weak, naïve and complicit in aiding the enemy.

Human perspectives may be as simple as who we liked better,

Mom or Dad. Or it may have more to do with our gender insecurities. Regardless, if you want to be a dreamer, creator, inventor and innovator, don't waste your time and energy hung up over sexuality. Let the herd roam over the pastures of pettiness and immaturity. You're not one of them.

Instead, ponder the subject of sexuality from a creative perspective. Ask yourself consciousness expanding questions such as: Do you see your body as a container for your spirit? Or could the spirit be a container for your body? Is skin the boundary that holds your conscious awareness? Or could the inside of your body be something completely different? Might your consciousness exist on the other side of your skin? Are you the things outside your body, the ground, the horizon, the universe? Are you your mind—your thoughts? If you observe your thoughts, who is the one observing? Is religion really the opposite of sex as some seem to suggest? Does the creator have a gender? Does the creator need reproductive organs? What are bodies? Might a creature on another planet be ashamed of its twelfth tentacle protruding from its squid-like form? Would it need to keep it covered?

Whether questions seem profound or silly, a shift in awareness takes place when we contemplate reality from a fresh perspective or the point of view of a child or even an alien from another world. Otherwise, we might go on with unconscious assumptions such as we are minds inside brains inside skulls thinking about all the important things we need to take seriously. Do this too long and the childlike nature within vanishes, possibly forever.

*"The yin having reached its climax, retreats in favor of the yang."*

—Wang Ch'ung

As your perspectives change during the course of your life, usually after following a certain way of being or thinking to its logical conclusion (this can take many years), you may begin to do and believe the opposite, almost as an escape from the prison of the ego. You may even be aware that life isn't simply black and white, but that the many shades of gray appear light or dark within the context of other colors.

As a creative, you should accept that you'll never truly arrive at some self-proclaimed pinnacle of understanding, genius or taste. Rather, the enjoyment of the journey—seeing and comparing the infinite shades—is the fire for endless inspiration and fascination. The inventor should not be set on one glorious ultimate invention, but to *live* a life of inventing.

## PERFECT NO MORE

We find ourselves in the age of self-improvement. What if I told you that you don't need to improve? Would that take a load off of your shoulders? Compared to others, are you really that terrible a person? What if the weight of all your self-doubt and inadequacies were finally lifted? How much could you accomplish in this life?

The Japanese who are known for their perfectionism, have a term called Wabi Sabi. Although the word is said to be difficult to translate, it essentially refers to the acceptance of imperfection. Most notably, you'll find the aesthetic of Wabi Sabi in pottery that is slightly misshaped or asymmetrical. You'll also notice it in gardens, tea houses and many forms of Japanese art. When contemplating such work, the viewer should feel a bittersweet peace. Perhaps it's because of the relief in knowing that nothing is perfect, yet beauty abounds anyways.

As you examine the shades of color and their lightness or darkness when placed next to other colors (I'm speaking of your perceptions throughout your life), it might be helpful to have this Wabi-sabi way of appreciating beauty.

While we're at it, let's look at one more Japanese term: Mono no aware (awa-re). It's another word that is considered impossible to translate into English. Literally, it means the pathos of things. When considering how temporary things are, a deep sensitivity can be developed for their beauty. The flower blooms, and just as it shows the first signs of withering, a gentle sadness is felt. With heightened awareness, one is lovingly moved by the splendor of life.

The knowledge that everything is passing and falling apart, including ourselves, is actually a comforting thought. It means that you have nothing to hold on to. There's nothing you can do, and therefore you have no responsibilities. You're free to watch the river



streaming past, and there's no need to interfere. There is no burden to reverse aging or fight against a changing world. You realize that much about life is beautifully perfect. There was never any reason to try and stop time. Everything will eventually turn to dust, even the pyramids. Once you embrace these things, you'll flow with life and have greater creative energy.

The creative journey is about higher consciousness—having the ability to love and appreciate the world around us. Acceptance and nonjudgment go a long way in helping us to find inspiration in everyday things.

Although we should refrain from demanding that everything be perfect—including ourselves—the creative needs to hone their craft. This may require many hours and years of work or simply allowing time to transform us. Life experience or endless repetition in developing skills add to your natural abilities and the unseen things you bring into this world.

As we learn more about who we are and how our art or craft fit together, we find that we are what we do. Director Steven Spielberg once said, 'I like the smell of film. I just like knowing there's film going through the camera.'

That reminds me of my brother-in-law the surgeon, who my wife said liked sniffing Band-Aids when he was a little boy. Everyone should have known that he would enter into the medical profession.

A creative is so at one with their art that it often affects everything else they do. When songwriting, designing or innovating are not going well, a person can feel out of sorts. Likewise, if a creative person is expressing themselves with great satisfaction, other areas of their life take on a cheerful air.

You may want to note that when the times of low productivity come, it is not reflection on your level of creativity. It may simply be a time you need inward musing. As I've mentioned before, sleep, meditate and rest your head. The pendulum may be about to swing in the other direction.

Summary: Swing gently like a pendulum between the resting mind and the daydreaming mind. Allow for a little collision and the

CARLOS ALEMAN

pieces of your imagination will fall like rain. Pick them up and do something with them.



## IMPECCABLE READINESS

*“The painter has the Universe in his mind and hands.”*

— Leonardo da Vinci

*“There is no time for cut-and-dried monotony. There is time for work. And time for love. That leaves no other time.”*

— Coco Chanel

The person that tries to become creative by their own efforts is wrestling with the most daunting, immovable and unassailable foe. If the self is inherently uncreative, how can the self become creative by sheer willpower?

As we mentioned before, people are generally conditioned by society, culture and many other things. It is not likely that you’ll find one person at a corporate meeting dressed as George Washington. It’s just not proper business attire someone might say, not to mention the wrong century.

Add every factor that determines how we behave, such as upbringing and personal longing, and there’s little anyone can do to break free of the herd way of thinking and certain worldviews.

Therefore, if the self cannot do anything to enhance or *self* improve to become more creative, a person may require a little help.

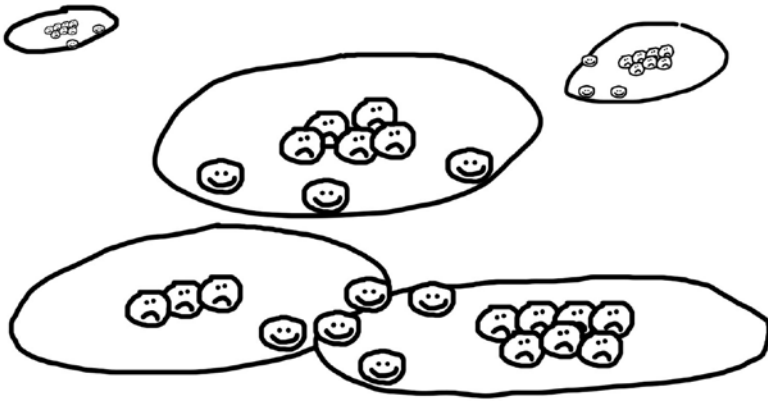
To truly be imaginative, one must detach from identity and tune in to something much deeper. As you may have guessed, it has something to do with the big question mark at the bottom of the ocean. Our part is simply to be impeccably ready.

To be impeccably ready is to have a profound understanding of one's own fallibility. With such an understanding, it is difficult to take oneself seriously. Someone that is characterized as impeccably ready tends to exhibit a sense of humor, playfulness, mischievousness, and is fully aware of shortcomings. He or she doesn't masquerade as any sort of wise or pious person.

An impeccably ready person is often well liked and received, after all, who doesn't like someone that doesn't take themselves too seriously? The artistic prima donnas and so called marketing geniuses may convince many that they're the ones with a direct line to ideas and creativity, but a true artist or inventor must at the core of their personality realize they are deeply flawed but somehow tuned into the right frequency. It is a phenomenon that is beyond personality.

Being an impeccably ready person and acutely aware of one's defects leads to an understanding and compassion for others. Not only does the impeccably ready person appreciate people's natures, but he or she can create products that are actually useful, games that are fun, stories that may be cathartic for the reader, and so on.

In short, loving oneself makes it possible to love others. If you're carrying the weight of being perfect and better than others, you'll be contemptuous of most people and have little to offer anyone.



Because of the herd mentality most people are bound by, many will congregate in cells of some sort. Within one cell, people will act and think in similar ways. But on the edges of a cell are those that might notice other cells, and those on other edges. Those in the center of a cell have little chance of ever seeing beyond what their worlds have always been like and appear will always be. Those on the edges may notice that life goes on without any apparent cataclysm in other distant cells. I hope this gives new meaning to living life on the edge.

Remember to be impeccably ready for the idea or flash of inspiration that is to come. Fall in love with the muse. That includes you.

## EXPECTATIONS

There is one notable thing that should be absent in your readiness for inspiration, ideas and the like—expectation. An admonition regarding what you hope to achieve is in order here, since the imagination comes from the realm of dreams and expectations depend upon the physical plane. It is not that the two are incompatible; however, one carries an ecstatic aroma and the other is often accompanied with the sting of defeat.

In the same way that creativity is the overflow of love for many

things, the creation needs to be made solely for the love. While the writing of the novel or preparation for the art exhibit may be considered ‘a labor of love,’ the chances that many readers or art enthusiasts will feel the same way is slim.

It may take many crushing defeats and disappointments for the creative to realize that it was never really about finding acceptance from others. Rather, the artist’s journey is a private affair, seeking to know the self better and drawing closer to universal mysteries.

The beautiful, the vulgar and obscene, despair and hope—all the twisted plotlines and mystifying characters in the story—the lyrics that seem destined for a particular chord progression, the black and white photographs that tell an unforgettable story—it is all for you, the artist.

The conscious, subconscious, dreams and the collective unconscious. The angels and the spirit world, your lover at the edge of the cosmos wishing you glory, happiness and riches. Your self, your higher self, your in between self, your undeniable self, your naughty self, your enlightened self, your sophisticated self, your lowly self, your secret self, your total self.

Don’t let the splendor of your inner world of creativity and dreams be affected by what others think. It would be like demanding that a hot air balloon rise from the ground with the earth still attached to it. Always create without expectation.

Suppose you’re a painter in America. There are millions of other painters, but only so many galleries. How do you get your foot in the door? One way is to be discovered by a wealthy art dealer. He or she can buy up some of your work, store some of it and pay galleries and museums to launch major exhibits. Despite the enormous investment, if all goes well, the work increases in value and the art dealer can eventually sell your work for millions. And yes, this sometimes happens, but life is short and why would you want to put your hopes in this sort of lottery of luck anyway?

Or suppose you’re a brilliant graphic designer. Your groundbreaking, cutting edge graphics causes jaws to drop and clients to empty their pockets. However, the art director gets all the credit while you wallow in obscurity. One day you set off to start your own company, only to discover that operating within a razor thin profit margin takes all the fun out of designing. You trudge along wishing for a less complicated life, perhaps one in which you’re left alone to

create while your supervisors become stress buffers. You read about the special effects company that went out of business while the motion picture company broke box-office records and made record profits. You're happy to at least be earning income, but doubtful that anyone ever gets the credit they deserve.

Still yet, imagine you want to be a famous author. If you can't find a major publisher or literary agency to fall in love with your work, you could always spend hundreds of thousands of dollars of your own money distributing your novels into airport bookstores. Enough travelers may be entertained and think the stories are well written enough to tell a friend. If you're very lucky, the word of mouth advertising may lead to the success of a best seller.

Chances are that with enough money and a little bit of luck, anyone can be successful or even famous, garnering adoring fans. But is it really love? It's definitely not. Just ask the athlete that's underperforming. The cheers quickly turn to boos. It's the same with artists and innovators—people are in love with the idea of what you might represent—maybe just a fantasy about being amazing in some way. If you're remarkable, they'll love you, if not, they won't. What kind of love is that?

The years quickly go by and you may miss the truly important things in life. Don't obsess about what people think and the conditions they place upon you. Do everything solely for the love.

At this point let's draw a clear distinction between dreams and expectations. Dreaming big may be just the thing that makes life worthwhile, the excitement that lifts you out of a rut and propels you toward realizing your personal goals. The thrill of finishing a novel or the pride you take in your work, whatever discipline, is in itself the realization of a dream. The expectation that you'll find mass acceptance or that anything you do will result in unconditional love is of course missing the whole point.

Expectations that something will be appreciated or well received are often the cause of great mental suffering. Make it a goal to have big dreams that aim to satisfy who you are what you need to express. The world may jeer or cheer. It doesn't matter. No approval or recognition can ever fill the emptiness, loneliness or inadequacy a person may feel at the core of their being.

However, if you learn to love yourself, you just might find that others will also love you. A person radiating with self approval and



confidence might be astounded to find there are many things that will go right, be well received and meant to be. Do it all for the love and don't care what anyone thinks.

Walt Disney was known to not care what others thought. It is said that he would ask ten people for an opinion regarding a certain matter. If they all told him one thing, he would choose to do the opposite. He probably knew himself well enough not to embark on any project that was motivated by doubt, fear, pressure or need for approval, instead electing to do the things that made him happy.

It is important to cultivate a spirit of reverie. Chasing windmills may be the only valid existence for the artist. Not to give away a good ending, but it was after Don Quixote became cured of his crazy visions that he died of a broken heart.

Hold true to the dreams, but tune out the rest of the world. Dare to believe in yourself, despite the criticisms, indifference, scorn, ridicule and contempt. You are an amazing and creative individual despite what anyone thinks. I know, because the big question mark at the bottom of the ocean is whispering magnificent things intended only for you.

## THE EXPERIMENT

I would like to contend that many people are filled with much negativity. It's all right and nothing to be ashamed about. It's quite startling and humbling when a person discovers for the first time how their perceptions are clouded by pessimism.

It was in my twenties that I made such a discovery. In my studies of philosophy and the disciplines of acceptance and nonjudgment, I came across a simple experiment: Try not judging anyone for an hour.

I was working at the time as a visual merchandiser (window trimmer/merchandise displayer). I would arrange products behind a plate glass window for extended periods of time. Behind me were crowds of mall shoppers. Most of the day, I couldn't help but notice people walk by and inevitably my mind would wander with associations based on appearance. *Oh, that person doesn't look very nice. This one cares about no one but himself...*

I soon discovered that I was addicted to forming judgments

about people, in essence, playing God. Not only was I judgmental, but because of the incessant and compulsive assessments about everyone around me, I was becoming contemptuous and had little peace of mind (I'm not exaggerating). Eventually, I extended the experiment to a day of nonjudgment, then a week, and now I try never to judge anyone.

The interesting thing about this experiment was that when I abstained from judging others, I realized for the first time how incredibly judgmental almost all people are. I would listen to other's judgments, thinking to myself, *'Why are you saying those things about that person? Don't you ever have anything nice to say about anyone? Maybe you should try the nonjudgment experiment.'* Yes, still some lingering judgment on my part!

I found that suspending my judgment of others was a weight lifted off of me. But that was only the beginning. The mind is so filled with negativity that unless you're actively pursuing positivity, you don't realize that the natural tendency for most people is to be grumpy and dissatisfied.

A big part of being an impeccably ready person is simply being positive. Believing in yourself when everyone is against what you believe—seeing the good in everything (the dark chocolate approach to life)—being willing to fail because you're in love with a dream or cause. Like Michelangelo, already seeing the finished sculpture within the slab of marble, you know it's just a matter of time before your work of art is completed.

Being constantly aware of our tendencies toward negativity can help us to rise above the whirlwind of unconstructive mental activity that gets in the way of our creativity. Loving causes us to embrace possibilities and our infinite potential. Contempt and aversion skews our perceptions.

Love life and let it inspire you to create.

## EPIC VULNERABILITY

It takes courage to be an artist, writer, inventor or anyone that wants to make something out of nothing. I want you to picture Andy Warhol as a boy for a moment. Think of the pale, sickly Warhol suffering from a neurological disease that caused involuntary

movements of his extremities. Think of him being mocked and bullied at school. Think of the high awareness that made him a genius and how much worse the pain of childhood must have seemed when amplified by his sensitivity.

Or consider others that were less than perfect in many ways—a deaf Beethoven, a non-verbal child named Einstein, a woman who contracted polio when she was six and broke her back as a teenager—known to the world as the great Mexican painter, Frida Kahlo.

We often think of creatives as *gifted*—as somehow cut from a different or better cloth than the rest of us. But more often than not, it is the severely imperfect person who is handicapped in some way and needs to try a little harder that achieves the unexpected. Sometimes the creative realizes that he or she is utterly incapable of fitting in with the rest of the world and invents new ways to do things simply out of necessity.

It could be a mood disorder or dyslexia, physical or psychological challenge, or perhaps like Benjamin Franklin—unable to attend school because of poverty—obstacles that seem insurmountable. It could be the realization that everything you once believed in has been reduced to rubble. Your heart breaks with the knowledge that you don't know who you are or what you want anymore. It could be the feeling that you are the least creative, least imaginative, least talented person in the world. All these things that make one feel lost and disconnected from meaning and purpose can actually be the creative fire itself.

Being an impeccably ready person, you move past the self-loathing, self-doubt and self-analysis, completely bypassing the ego to purge yourself of all the things—judgement, defense, control, distrust—that rob you of your creative energy. Whether one is afraid or fearless, an epic vulnerability is required to imagine and create. It's fundamentally the same as falling in love.

Why would anyone want to take such a risk—taking a step of faith into a possibly perilous unknown? It is an irrational surrendering and giving up of control. And yet both being a creative and falling in love are powerful because we realize that within insanity we sometimes find sanity.

Why do so many spend countless hours practicing and studying techniques in art and literature, yet in the end fail to create anything

they're genuinely happy with? It's because they're afraid of falling in love. Without love, there is nothing to express, nothing to say that truly matters.

And there is no love without vulnerability. An epic vulnerability is required to create and risk ridicule and rejection. Yet we all have love. Everyone loves something. We may even find that there is a broad spectrum of things we love.

So in imagining and creating, why not direct our gaze at all the things that are easily derided and scorned—the unsophisticated, simplistic, and things too elaborate to be understood, the controversial and the things that are an acquired taste, the frivolous, the futuristic, the childlike, the painful, the wise and even the foolish or comical?

Often the first step of a creative endeavor begins with a feeling of incompetence or futility. I'm not good at this—why am I even trying? I'm not suited for this sort of thing...I shouldn't be attempting this—I don't have the natural ability...I don't have the skills or experience...I've never really been like the types of people who do this...

I didn't start writing novels until I was 43. I had somehow concluded that the young writers that I grew up with—the ones who spoke often about being a published author one day were the ones blessed with an author gene or special inclination or predisposition for putting people into trances with words.

Call me a late bloomer, but one day after a long trip, I wanted to try my hand at writing. After several hundred words—a journal that turned into an autobiography that turned into fiction—I had my first manuscript. I sent out over four hundred submissions to literary agents and publishers and was rejected each time.

This was about the time that e-books became popular, so I self-published my novel to the Amazon Kindle Store. I was shocked to discover that people were buying and enjoying my book. I was even more surprised when it was named a finalist for a major book award.

Eventually I found a small publisher and wrote a second novel. As with the first book, I refined and polished the story through many drafts until I was finally happy with it. In my heart, I knew it was well written and told a poignant story about perseverance and love. Yet without anyone reading it, I felt reluctant to draw my own conclusions. Was it really any good—or not?

The publisher and editor read it and congratulated me. Contained in their compliments was the sentiment that they had been changed forever in a small way. And that was enough for me.

Through hard work, I was able to make something that another person could appreciate—not an easy task. As I write this, I'm working on my sixth novel. I don't know when all my novels will be published or if they'll ever find wide acceptance, but as I stated before, it is never about that.

Creativity is a personal journey. I seek to meet certain standards I set for myself and pay close attention to what might be fascinating messages from my subconscious. I may or may not succeed in increasing my fan base over the years, but all things will be forgotten and turn to dust one day. The satisfaction of writing and a nod from at least one person makes everything worthwhile.

As you strive to be impeccably ready, remember that you're probably not going to be good at something until you are completely immersed in your creative endeavor. Natural ability or education will not necessarily help you to achieve your potential. Being willing to roll up your sleeves and get dirty with the labor of wrestling with the unknown is vital. A trial and error, hands on approach to all forms of doing and making will provide depth and originality to your work.

Being bad at school and having no natural talent may actually be an advantage. I consider myself an autodidact. I've found that teaching myself how to do things helps me to achieve a fuller mastery when turning imagination into art.

When learning from another, steps are often missed, nuances are lost. And now that we've entered the information age, knowledge is everywhere. One can consume large quantities of scholarly works or teach oneself to play the guitar by watching YouTube.

Sometimes a teacher can get you where you need to go faster, other times it's the unlimited 'alone time' that will provide the depth of understanding that results in a deeper learning. Accompanied by the satisfaction in the do-it-yourself method is the excitement that leads you to the next discover and the next eureka moment.

If you want to learn an established art form such as playing Chopin correctly, then you need an instructor to point out to you every facet of the craft such as correct breathing, posture, dynamics needed to express emotion, the soft and loud spots on keys and many other things. It may take decades to put these things into practice

and with an almost super human effort you can achieve true greatness.

There are many disciplines that can be divided into *creating and imagining* or *performing and interpreting*. The choreographer, screenwriter and composer imagine and create, the dancer, actor and concert pianist perform and interpret, sometimes with great artistry.

Your work may be a mixture of artistic interpretation and creativity. But the more creative you become, the more your imagination will lead you away from norms and conventions.

If you wish to tread on new ground, you may study under great and accomplished masters, but no one can truly help you. Picasso, a child prodigy and a classically trained painter, blew up the art world not by reproducing Rembrandts, but by deconstructing reality. He didn't invent cubism but was able to synthesize many influences to achieve extraordinary things.

Jackson Pollock stumbled upon his style of abstract expressionism by accidentally spilling paint on the floor. Those around him that were supportive of his artistic aspirations immediately realized that the world would be different and art itself would possess a new freedom.

Again, learning to play Chopin correctly from a master musician is a remarkable achievement. If you can do this, the world should appreciate your sacrifices, hard work and dedication, not to mention the investment in time. The old must be preserved and introduced to every new generation. However, since we are on the subject of imagination and creativity, it must be noted that the one who departs from tradition and convention is the one in whose footsteps we should follow.

Philip Glass, a classically trained American composer, creates a type of hypnotic music comprised of repetitive structures. It's not for everyone, but if you're like me and resonate with his brand of avant-garde creativity, you can't help but become a devotee in an inexplicable way.

Many creative individuals have a dog whistle effect. They may not be accepted by the establishment, peers or the mainstream, but their fan base hears something no one else can. The dog whistle hearers loyally follow the invisible glow of uniqueness and esoteric charm.

Anyone who creates will find that people who possess similar

souls (for lack of a better term) will be attracted to their creations. In addition to being a fan of Philip Glass, I'm a great admirer of the Japanese novelist, Haruki Murakami and a sub category of indie alternative rock I happen to resonate with. I suspect that there is some type of dog whistle effect happening when I find that I am utterly unable to stop listening to music or reading novels without any explanation as to why.

Creating in a manner that truly inspires others is certainly within the realm of mystery. It cannot be taught. The impeccably ready person may have classical or formal training in their chosen discipline, but relies mostly on intuition and the hope that there are others who are like-minded and receptive to their endeavors.

For everyone that admires your accomplishments, there is somebody that despises every utterance from your mouth, every brushstroke on a canvas and every expression you attempt to record on paper or digitally. Accept and ignore. The creative's job is to prepare the party, invite people and wait to see if anyone shows up.

I once went to a large book fair to promote my work. I paid an annual membership fee to a local writer's club simply for the right to sit at a table under a tent and meet readers. I soon found that I preferred walking around the fair among the people and handing out printed bookmarks advertising my novel. I found it impossible to tell who would accept a free bookmark and who would refuse.

When walking toward a person, a sour face could erupt with a smile and person shining with effervescence might suddenly turn abrasive. There was absolutely no way to know based on outward appearance who would be friendly, uninterested or even hostile.

I often think of that day when I write novels or prepare for art exhibits. I try to be impeccably ready for anything or anyone. I do, however, have the feeling that if you're impeccably ready for an idea to come, your fans, disciples and anyone who might be interested has already begun searching for you and some will be prepared to meet you half way should you decide to seek them out.

Summary: Avoid expectations. Do everything solely for the love of it. Be positive. Be vulnerable. Accept that some people will relate to you and others won't.





## DELICATE CONFABULATIONS

*"You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have."*

— Maya Angelou

Creativity workshops have been around since at least the 1960's. I've never been to one, but supposedly they're a type of seminar a person goes to searching for a little encouragement and a chance to network. I'll probably never attend such a workshop or creative writing class or anything that claims will improve my vision or ingenuity.

I wouldn't mind sitting in on a lecture by Junot Diaz and listen to him discuss literature. There are a lot of authors and artists I'd love to learn from. I've picked up a few books on writing in the past and have learned very useful tidbits that I will forever put into practice, such as finding a balance between expository passages and narrative summaries (Me thinks me knows what that means).

I try to heed the Stephen King admonition not to use adjectives. I also refrain from introducing characters who immediately begin to summarize everything that came before and other gems of writing advice. But actually improving your creativity, I venture to say that this cannot be taught.

Don't despair. You're already an imaginative genius—you just

keep getting in your own way, if in fact you struggle leaving the physical plane and floating around in a world of fantasy. And that's not such a bad thing—to be practical, grounded, responsible and aware of your earthly reality. But since we're on the subject of imagination, let's explore the mechanics of it in this chapter.

There are many similarities between creativity and what a magician or illusionist does when he makes someone levitate or vanish. In reality, the so called conjurer usually does nothing. A team of assistants work furiously behind the scenes to execute an elaborate deception. Behind the curtain and under the cover of loud music there may be a forklift. Below the stage, a well-orchestrated group of technicians.

What ultimately matters is what the audience sees, not the hidden spectacle which will remain a closely guarded secret. After the show, a person might walk up to the magician and with eyes filled with astonishment confess that he or she now believes in magic. The magician, with great effort, restrains himself from laughter.

In a Hollywood film set, the façade of buildings indicate a small town or shopping district. With great attention to detail, doorways and windows are made to look genuine, but behind the walls lie a latticework of plywood and support beams erected without any aesthetic concerns. That's if there is actually anything there at all, and not an actor walking through a green room that will eventually be replaced by CGI.

In all art, we only see the surface. The hours of work and years of practice and dedication are concealed from us. When writing, the story teller creates the illusion of reality, seducing us to believe that the protagonists somehow exist or at least they represent actual forces in this world. We desperately cling to the literary journey, hoping it will take us places with greater meaning than our ordinary lives (We underestimate the significance of our own lives).

No one ever needs to know that dozens of drafts were written—that proofreaders found hundreds of spelling and grammatical errors, the plotline was problematic, and the author at one point was so discouraged he almost gave up on the project altogether.

In painting, you'll probably never notice the undertones. Your eyes will see it. It may register in your subconscious, but you won't actually be aware of a certain amount of complexity. There's a limit to how many things a person can store in our conscious mind.

Perhaps there are only so many things a person can notice visually without intense focus.

The museum goer only sees thin layers of pigments on a canvas, not the work, the sacrifices, the rejections, the heartbreaks and struggles—and probably not even the undertones (By the way, if you're ever painting and all seems lost, simply consider all the disastrous brushstrokes as merely the undertones. Anticipate that the next layer will introduce greater success in movement, texture and blending of color).

The graphic design agency will kick around thousands of ideas, halfheartedly settling on one message that a client needs to express. Over time, frustration and arguments are overcome. A corporate identity is created complete with a logo in just the right colors with the correct psychological effect.

Eventually a feel-good commercial airs that says just the right things in thirty seconds. You sit at home and decide to actually watch it instead of fast-forwarding. You get a chuckle out of it, unaware of all the hell and drama that went into it.

Repeat after me: I am an illusionist.

If you are involved in any creative effort, whether designing a mobile device, an app or producing the marketing materials for it, the user only sees the magic—not the trickery and sleight of hand.

Oh you clever rascal!

And there's a good reason you wouldn't want anyone to know what lies behind the deceptions. Not only would it ruin the experience, but there's a chance your methods might be called into question.

Granted, we know that the novelist is essentially a big fat flaming pants liar, but for the most part, few care to dwell on ethical considerations when it comes to the creation of something beautiful, meaningful or entertaining.

It's been said that there is nothing truly original. Whether or not this is a truthful statement, the creative should accept this as license to take what already exists and modify.

The famous quote, 'good artists copy, great artists steal,' is

attributed to Picasso or more accurately to Steve Jobs quoting Picasso, and more than likely, a paraphrasing of a T.S. Eliot quote. In other words, steal, but make sure that when the work of art bears your name, it no longer resembles what it was in its former life. It is now something new. Please have a great respect for the creations of others. Someone might be able to tell that you were inspired and influenced by someone, but your work should essentially be you.

Art, inventions and new ideas are usually the result of some sort of synthesis.

The word synthetic gets a bum rap. You may think of the word synthesizer as an electronic piano that attempted to reproduce the sound of a concert string section with a stale quality, lacking the warmth of actual violins and cellos, but improving technologically over time. Or you may just think of synthetics as a brew of toxic chemicals slowly turning us all into plastic.

History's first synthetic materials may very well have been made not by modern humans, but Neanderthals. In a complex process involving high temperatures in oxygen free environments a 'super' glue was made to be used in tools—something not occurring in nature.

Ever since, man has been creating new *unnatural* things. We're sometimes quick to adopt the new but also suspicious of what Frankenstein creation we might be releasing into the world. When planes were first invented, many thought that man wasn't meant to fly and resisted the age of aviation. The same can be said for many modern inventions.

And with every new thing, the world moves for better or worse into strangeness, ambiguity, fear, acceptance, uncertainty, cynicism and optimism. As we're left scratching our heads, the newly hatched inventions and ideas are adapted for commercial and military use as well as art.

And yet the new is not really new or original, but a blending—a synthesis of preexisting styles, narratives, elements and technologies. And this is what is meant by great artists steal. If you try to lay down the cornerstone of your next novel, proposal or musical composition with something completely original, your project might never get off the ground.

I've seen many ego driven people insist that they will create something the world has never seen before, perhaps to prove their greatness, but then they find it difficult to get down to the actual work. The worst perpetrators are the purists who vow to do things in the most difficult manner possible as if driven by a martyr complex.

There are artists that refuse to work in acrylic paints, because they think the colors are too artificial, wishing to do everything in a way that emphasizes a striving for creative perfection.

It would make perfect sense if you specialize in preserving the tradition of oil painting, but to say that the old is inherently better than the new is precariously close to snobbery. In whatever you do, resist at all costs elitism and anything that might make you feel superior to others.

Rather than taking oneself too seriously, why not be moved by something someone else has done, incorporate a tiny bit of it—just enough to get you started—and then combine it with something totally different that also inspires you?

Along the way, welcome the surprise discoveries, the accidents, the breakthroughs that might cause you to change course and lead to some unanticipated place (authentic originality). As you may know, most inventions and discoveries are the result of mishaps or projects intended for completely different motives.

You must at least get the ball rolling and have faith that something will present itself in the form of a great idea. Sometimes the idea will be a flash of insight. Other times, the realization that the bizarre thing you're working on is actually quite compelling and subtly beautiful. Instead of having a fit because your project isn't turning out the way you wanted it to, ask yourself—is it truly a monstrosity? Or could changing the way you look at it make all the difference?

Back when documentary channels actually broadcasted documentaries, I once watched a wildlife program about lions hunting in Africa. Interestingly, the stubborn lions that kept chasing a particular antelope would often run out of steam and lose their prey. But the lions that were good at switching targets and changing direction were masters of opportunity and surprise, providing more

food for the pride.

The creative process can be a lot like a chase through a golden Savannah plain. Whether you're typing a thousand words an hour or laying hundreds of brushstrokes on a canvas or making a hundred edits in Adobe Illustrator, things are happening fast and you'll frequently find yourself making split second decisions.

Rather than telling you to use your gut instincts, let's simplify matters even more:

Make yourself happy.

How do you know the painting is finished? Because you're happy with it. How do you know that the placement of the text is correct in relationship with the graphic? Because you find it to be visually pleasing. How do you know that it's the final draft of the manuscript and ready for publishing? Because you can't think of single thing to add to the story and there's nothing about it you wish to change.

You may have to indeed labor on your project some more if your editor or art director find weaknesses in your work, but your aim should be pleasing yourself.

According to legend, Michelangelo once challenged Leonardo daVinci to a painting competition. Although the two men never participated in such a contest involving dueling frescoes, what Michelangelo set out to demonstrate (if this indeed happened) was quite fascinating. Da Vinci believed that all creativity should be based on precise measurements. Michelangelo believed that the human eye was sufficient.

I've always had a more Michelangelo approach even though I was born on da Vinci's birthday and am somewhat of a fanatic when it comes to his scientific drawings. You may be more of a technical and exacting person or someone who simply goes with the flow, but I think ultimately the same means apply—make yourself happy, even if it implies that something simply looks right to the eye, or sounds right to the ear, or feels right to the touch.

'Eyeballing' as opposed to measuring everything inherently boosts your self-confidence since you're relying on your intuition and ability to make decisions. If the scribble should begin *just about there*, why not start rendering it and act upon your sense of balance and

aesthetics? If you're reading back a paragraph you wrote for a novel and it sounds right to your ear, why not give yourself approval and move on to the next sentence? If there's a mistake, you or your editor might find it later.

*I don't even know what I want.*

That's a valid objection. To make yourself happy, you must first know what excites and inspires you. When I was growing up there were museums and libraries as the primary source of information, but now with the internet, you can spend twenty four hours a day reading or looking at the creative handiwork of man. Let me give you a little of my creative musings as they relate to painting from the year 2008.

...William Blake. There's something otherworldly and powerful about his paintings. Yes, he was a strange man with religious zeal, advocating free love yet never actually committing adultery—never mind that—ethereal light, iconic imagery, oh so haunting...Amy Sol. Korean American artist. Merging Japanese manga and anime with Art Nouveau. She mixes her own egg tempera paints. Such muted tones and whimsical feminine themes. They refer to her as a pop surrealist. I'm not sure that's quite right. Her work is definitely not low brow, even though I do like that stuff...Andrew Gonzalez. A visionary painter. Who does he remind me of? Oh yes! William Blake. He's sort of a modern Blake, high on mushrooms. Anyway—I don't judge. So much beautiful art—I'm in love...

It wasn't long before I was cranking out canvases that synthesized the styles of these three different artists. Good artists copy, great artists steal. It's not for me to say if my work is good or great or terrible, but I have indeed stolen and yet, in a sense, my art is completely original (Not to mention my work looks nothing like theirs). It's not about *what* I painted, but the ineffable feelings behind it, the how and the why.

It was also about this time that I started writing. Yes, a very productive time for me (Pay close attention to your artistic cycles). Here's some of my creative musings for my literary foray:

...I've read some pretty bad books lately. I think I can do

better. Khaled Hosseini—*his* novels, however, are amazing. The Hosseini family comes from a poetic tradition. No wonder his work is so lyrical...makes me want to be a writer. I'll never write like that. But I have to write. How else does one respond to such inspiration? What if Pablo Neruda had told stories—what would that be like? Or what if the style of Gabriel Garcia Marquez entered the equation—Latin magical realism meets Persian poetry? What if I created some truly experimental literature? —Write a chapter inspired by C.K. Williams and the rest of it trying to find my own voice. Should I consider such lofty ambitions? I don't know anything about writing. I haven't even taken a class. What if everyone hates what I do? I can't even think of a plot for a story. Why not simply start?...

Just as the magician doesn't explain how the person levitates, I probably shouldn't tell you about all the neurotic self babble it took for me to become a writer. Nevertheless, I want you to see that behind every creative act, there is inspiration, doubt and perhaps most importantly, curiosity. Aren't you just dying to know what your ideas would look like if completed?

While we're at it, let me throw in a some of the creative musings from my days as a product designer:

...They want me to do what!? The CEO needs to excite the board of directors and shareholders with a new product that features all the company's services in one platform that resembles an interactive tradeshow. I need to start mocking up what it'll look like...there's got to be some open source code I can grab...I'll spend a day looking at tradeshow booths online...need to come up with some vector animations and unique user navigation...it'll all come together...it must...

I could go on, but technology can be boring to some. The last example, though, relates to the practical world of working within a corporation. So you might say, painting and writing novels equal fun, finishing a project for work equals drudgery.

I'm sure you see the error in this. The project needs to be perceived as fun in order to stimulate your sense of play and therefore your imagination and creativity. But how? You're working for an cold mechanical soulless organization—what about the



deadline, the intimidating supervisor, the backstabbing, the people from the business development department that come by every 15 minutes to beat you with clubs? This has nothing to do with artistic expression and locking yourself away for hours doing the very thing YOU want to do, the way YOU want to do it.

Unless you've achieved financial independence, you'll need to put your talents to use in ways that are not quite as satisfying for part of the day. You simply must shift your attitude and perceptions.

One method that works well for many is to literally turn work into play. Take your project and chop it up into small pieces and transform the whole thing into a board game. Create your own rules and have fun. Or simply make a list of all the steps needed to accomplish the job at hand. Checking off each of the tiny stages of the project can be satisfying and enjoyable. It is the child in you that will produce better work.

## HOW TO BE A CHILD

First, let's establish the difference between being childlike and childish. Actually, I don't need to explain it to you, just look at the two words. I think you would agree with me that to be childlike is the more appealing trait.

Seeking to be childlike involves a mixture of innocence and maturity. It is a state free from cynicism, perceived limitation and resentment. Sometimes, as we grow older, we actually think we're also growing in wisdom by calling ourselves 'realistic' which can actually be a form of childish arrogance. It appeals to our vanity to consider ourselves somehow more sophisticated than those who still believe anything is possible and dare to dream.

I would like you to consider—if you can remember your early childhood—the toys you were given. You were probably happy to receive anything that was big and colorful, bouncy and interesting. As you approached brat-hood, you insisted on getting the presents that you wanted—the *exact* gift you wanted more than life itself. But as you got older, a strange thing began to happen.

With maturity, you preferred to be surprised (An adult with a childlike quality). Yes, hopefully someone might give you a present that was to your liking, but there was a special delight involved in not

knowing.

As you got older, you found yourself saying more often when someone would ask you what you would like to eat, where you would like to go or do, oh—I don't care—surprise me. In effect, you had returned to the early childhood experience of delighting in surprise.

However, most of us don't welcome surprise in every facet of our lives. It's only human to worry about uncertain outcomes and unforeseen events.

Yet if we can summon our childlike natures, life can be extraordinary and all things can seem new. This should especially apply to our creative endeavors. When sitting at the outdoor café of the imagination, it is not only beneficial to daydream and fantasize about the realm of make-believe, but a childlike curiosity and perception of the physical world is also helpful.

Do clouds appear as giant cotton balls or marshmallows playing what am I? Does grass look like a jungle habitat for tiny bears and giraffes and all manner of life forms? Do streets seem like airport runways? Can you jump over every road sign and light pole you pass in your mind? Can you picture your friends as visitors from other planets pretending to be human?

Could this entire world be a computer simulation? Can you imagine yourself as a one dimensional entity living inside the thickness of a page in a book? What if that bright window in the living room were actually a television and the television were a window? Can the ordinary be extraordinary? Can you turn everything into its opposite?

To be a child, one must transform life into a playground, a reverie, a forest full of what ifs. As you ponder the real and imaginary, you might one day hear yourself say something interesting. If you're lucky, you'll mishear what you actually said. When this happens, you'll find yourself to be the author of something genuinely original. People will wonder how in the world you came up with something so unusual and imaginative.

You don't have to tell anyone that it was simply a confabulation of things you thought you heard. Or perhaps you misunderstood something altogether and based your perceptions on something that never existed. It would seem like you lifted yourself off the ground by climbing invisible stairs. How did you arrive at such heights? Someone might ask.

Maybe you dreamt of a beautiful painting or musical composition. With great envy you muse, *if only I had thought of that*. But then you awaken to realize that nobody other than you had created, conceived and invented the things that arose in the subconscious. If it's still fresh in your mind, you can set off to capture your dream and introduce it to the world.

Often the great ideas come, not from our own brilliance, but by a blunder or misunderstanding. Other times they come from following a pattern. Aligning ourselves with nature often yields beautiful results. Just as Chinese landscape paintings are in harmony with the wood grain, we can superimpose our creativity over what already exists.

Da Vinci urged artists to look at old walls covered in dirt or stones with streaks to discover landscapes, battles, clouds and faces so that 'the mind will be furnished with an abundance of original designs and subjects.' Michelangelo was known to sculpt from marble considered 'defective'. The statue of David was carved from a block that was used and discarded by two other artists.

With a childlike way of seeing the world, we are, in essence, working with coloring books, scribbling inside the lines and, if audacious enough, disregarding lines, rules and conventions. If you can be such a child, you are an artist.

## JURASSIC APPIRITIONS

The child within you must also have a mischievous side. As Alan Watts once said, we are like a stew. We need a pinch of salt or else our personalities will be bland. Too much salt and the stew will be horrendous, but just a little will do the trick.

To make our artwork, music and stories you must exaggerate like a child so that people will notice what would otherwise be missed, and above all, delight in mayhem and drama.

A perfect example that comes to mind was the Michael Crichton novel, *Jurassic Park*. The cloning of dinosaur DNA was an interesting part of the novel, but nothing compared to full grown prehistoric monsters escaping captivity and tearing people to bits. Please note the 'Jurassic' plot vehicle in most stories—the life threatening illness, adultery, divorce, murder—My God, did you see

the guy they just brought to the emergency room?

Much of the publishing world and television programming is comprised of murder mysteries and hospital dramas. In the art world you'll also find 'Jurassic' apparitions such as highly saturated colors, exaggerated forms and controversial subjects. Music is also about extreme emotions such as falling in love and breaking up. Throughout all these disciplines you'll no doubt also detect an underlying eroticism.

You may consider it an unfair and manipulative assault on your senses. The amygdala, the emotion center of your brain, is purposely stimulated when you're asked to make a purchase or donate money to a cause. The music plays and suddenly you find yourself to be more charitable. Whether you work at a car dealership or attend a religious service, when the choir sings the heartstrings play along.

Please use this knowledge for good and not evil. Corporations use emotion to sell products every day. Why not the struggling artist and inventor? Our motivations aren't so bad. Read our books, buy our paintings, listen to our music, invest in our ideas. We only wish to entertain or simply make you smile—and maybe make a little money along the way.

## **A PLACE FOR YOU**

All right, aside from attempting to be childlike, rolling with the confabulations, conjuring terrifying dinosaurs and being a drama queen or king, how do I actually become imaginative and creative?

Glad you asked. If you've ever fantasized about something—which you most certainly have—you should be aware that there is a place where you can experiment and try anything. It may be something you would never do in real life.

The students may fantasize about kissing 'Indiana Jones' while not being completely present in class. An elderly person may imagine that they're receiving an award for their life's work and later celebrating by dancing on a bar top and spraying people with champagne. Or like Einstein, a physicist may lay on his couch and visualize planets and their orbits. Your imagination is the perfect place to test or investigate the great what ifs.

## IMAGINING

Create scenarios in your mind with ideal conditions. What if certain factors were all present and all the things that could prevent something from happening were absent? What if two different styles of painting merged perfectly? What if the protagonist became the antagonist in the final chapter? What if the sad lyrics were put to a happy melody? What if the computer program were simplified? What if the dinosaurs escaped?

All this fantasizing and daydreaming should be done in a quiet place, but not always. Sometimes listening to music can trigger a whopper of an idea. Other times, a boring lecture causes the mind to wander, allowing for an idea to slip into an otherwise unreceptive mind. And you know all about the brainstorm under a shrieking showerhead.

If you're fortunate enough to live near a Japanese garden, you'll find them to be carefully created as a window into another world. Similarly, you may want to arrange your surroundings to be more conducive to daydreaming. A space that is poetic and artistic is a way of stating that you're in tune with the finer things, having resolved the practical issues of food, clothing and safety. However, imagining can happen anywhere, even in a stressful and uncomfortable situation.

And now for the hard part. Change your status from content consumer to content creator. Instead of spending a significant portion of your time gaming and devouring other people's social media, strive to be the one to who actually writes the blog, codes the game, shares their art or any other activity that involves making instead of using. Consumption of media can sometimes be inspiring, but try to create more than you watch, listen, click, swipe or scroll.

Never think you're too old or young to be an artist, visionary, dreamer or entrepreneur. For that matter, you can accomplish anything you set your mind to. Whatever your shortcomings are, consider them assets. Imagine that your flaws and limitations are the very thing that keep you from being like most people who accept a world devoid of magic. You have an edge. No one is exactly like you or can do, think or dream quite the way you can.

Summary: Be an illusionist. Synthesize what already exists to create something new. Be a master of opportunity. Make yourself

happy. Be a child. Be a drama queen or king (But only when trying to be creative).



## BEYOND BELIEF

*“Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.”*

—Thomas Merton

*“The earth has music for those who listen.”*

—William Shakespeare

My second novel, *Nuno*, was based loosely on the life of my grandfather, Francisco, who spent twelve years as a political prisoner on an island soon after a revolution had brought an extreme form of socialism known as communism. You’re probably familiar with the historic events.

Writing the story provided me a way of processing my thoughts, feelings and childhood memories of personally knowing someone that had once been tortured and forced to live in subhuman squalor—a man who was a mixture of humor and post traumatic stress.

I chose the literary style of magical realism, joining absurdity and comedy to make the narrative bearable to the reader. The more I thought and obsessed about my grandfather, the more I could think



of him fondly as a hero and larger than life figure, rather than an illustration of suffering.

The working title for the novel was *The Veiled Splendor of Life*, which I concluded sounded too pretentious and chose instead the eponymous protagonist, Nuno. The concept of a better existence hidden away from human eyes was hinted at throughout the story. However, I would like to argue that for the most part, the opposite is true. The splendor of existence is usually in plain sight.

You might call this an awakened state, enlightenment or the scales having fallen off your eyes, or simply perceiving life as a sensitive and creative individual.

The artist, him or herself, may not even be aware of this dimension to reality until they begin sketching a subject or painting the still-life. Why would van Gogh be so passionate about a vase of flowers? Why would Warhol elevate soup cans (mundane mass production) to high art? Why are commonplace and ordinary things often found in museums?

Because—our physical three dimensional universe is *just* that fascinating and awe-inspiring. Of course we all have an impoverished ability to appreciate the splendor of existence. I'm just as guilty as everyone else of not noticing beauty or forgetting that everything around us is a miracle of light, shadow and the play of physical laws.

Before you search for a guru to alter your state of consciousness, try looking at a glass of water. Examine the shapes, patterns and reflections in the glass and liquid. Imagine taking a pencil and drawing what you see with photorealistic detail. You might consider it impressive and worth showing others if indeed you could accomplish such a feat. But why is the detailed drawing so impressive and interesting, but not an actual glass of water?

One of the great opportunities you have as the artist or creative person is to remind people that existence is grand and remarkable. As most human minds make every attempt to shut off the information overload of thousands of multisided objects competing for our attention, allow just a tiny bit of it to overwhelm and inspire you. That is true enlightenment, to be fazed by few things and amazed by everything.

## PLASTIC WRAP

In 2005, a doctor told me that I could keep the MRI film taken of my throat. Sure—keep it as a souvenir, he said, as if I had made a purchase at a theme park and the gift shop had just thrown in a freebie.

The dark translucent pages, when held to a light, showed multiple images of what appeared to be a large mass on my thyroid gland. A surgeon later removed what turned out to be a benign tumor along with half my thyroid gland (a hemi-thyroidectomy).

I'm not convinced I needed this surgery, perhaps some iodine would have shrunk the mass, but that's another story altogether. Besides, surgeons get paid to chop and slice. That's what they do.

Before this experience, I wasn't even sure what a thyroid gland was. Seeing this strange looking organ inside of me was a reminder that we're complexed creatures made up of many parts. Some philosophers are quite interested in questions such as *who am I? What am I? What is me? What is not me?*

For some, the skin is a convenient boundary or edge to separate self and all its parts from the outside world. Consciousness is also perceived to be limited to the human body, particularly in the head. Get a group of theologians and scientists around the table and soon you might have a heated debate regarding the nature of the soul, mind, consciousness and whether the edges of things truly confine their constitution.

But since you're reading this book and I have your full attention, let me whisper a question in your ear. Why can't the parts outside of our skin be just as much *us* as the parts within?

When I first made this inquiry into the nature of self, I picked up the closest object to me which happened to be a box of plastic wrap laying on the kitchen counter. The possibility that this bright yellow object with the words Glad Wrap written upon it was a part of me produced a chuckle as well as an expansion of my consciousness.

Whether the concepts of interconnectedness and non-duality are based in reality, the sense that life is one big phenomenon that transcends edges certainly allows for the creative mind to think beyond the self.

I can't help but wonder if when van Gogh painted *Starry Night* he somehow considered the cosmos above an extension of himself.

Rather than simply thinking outside the box, try to identify with your surroundings and even things that appear to be the opposite of what you consider yourself to be.

Once you're having lunch, sitting across the table from another human being, and you're comfortable with the idea that they're essentially an extension of yourself, you might just discover that you can imagine, dream or envision anything. Not to mention you may well find yourself to be a more loving, accepting and nonjudgmental person.

Even if you consider life to be dreadful and absurd and can't bring yourself to use words such as beautiful to describe it, you must admit that it is certainly fascinating. Take the good with the bad and be amazed.

### I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M DOING

Once, when returning from a week in Japan and presenting my passport to a US customs officer at JFK International Airport, I was in for a bit of reverse culture shock when the man greeted me casually without eye contact or a smile. He also neglected to return my passport to me with both hands and a friendly bow. I was already missing the Japanese who seemed to constantly strive to make me feel special.

Then the thought occurred to me that this could be the basis of a novel. I could feel the dinosaurs escaping again in another *what if* plot. The Jurassic apparition this time would center on a traveler that visits the ancient and magical city of Kyoto, returns home and falls into a deep depression when the world turns ordinary once again. The protagonist meets up with a group of people that also don't feel like they belong in society. Tragedy and mystery ensue.

The catalyst for my creativity was my slight oversensitivity to an unusual experience. My response was exaggeration for dramatic effect. When using your imagination to create something out of nothing, it is helpful to start with a feeling or something that seems impossible to express.

If you do possess a simple way of explaining something, then your idea may lack depth. An idea should leave you slightly baffled and eager to spend many hours exploring its magnificence and

implications.

Ideas often convey universal principles and as such give us a sense that certain things may ring true or that we somehow identify with them. Whether people are attracted to your ideas or completely reject them, try to be objectively curious, thinking things through and investigating every *what if* until it leads somewhere or morphs into something else.

Most helpful to your imagination is the appreciation and contemplation of mystery. Inspiration and creative power come from not knowing. Knowing something will quickly aid in the insertion of round pegs into round holes and square pegs into square holes. Knowing will fill in all your blanks and complete all your forms. Knowing will make you feel secure, logical and correct. But *not* knowing will create a space for infinite possibilities. I find life to be enchanting when I can say the words *I don't know*.

Where is this project going? I don't know. What will the climax of the story be? I don't know. How will the story end? I don't know. What will the painting look like? I don't know. Will you ever find an agent, a venue to perform at, an investor, a publisher, an audience? I don't know. Will you ever have the breakthrough you're searching for? I don't know. Do you even understand anything about art, writing, technology, music, dance choreography, filmmaking or inventing? I'm sorry—I don't really know.

A person that claims to understand creativity may not understand it at all. But a person that knows that they don't understand, probably understands the mechanics of creativity in a profound way, for the simple reason that creatives are contemplators of mystery.

The artist dabbles in symbols. The non-artist takes everything literally. The artist surrenders to possibilities. The non-artist wants to be in control. The artist seeks options. The non-artist clings to order. Surrender to the possibilities and you'll access tremendous creative energy within. Attempt to play god and the world will become stale and lose its magic.

There's one sure thing you can do to fully activate your imagination: realize that you don't have a chance in the world at being able to control your life. Once you give up and no longer hold so tightly to your opinions, cleverness, insistence on being right and

getting your way, taking yourself so seriously, and believing you know everything, the ideas will come and soon you'll realize that there aren't enough hours in the day to express them. You may even find it hard to sleep because you're so excited to get to work.

## SELF-DOUBT

Reading this chapter, you may be thinking—*all right, I get it. You have to be open minded, questioning everything and assuming nothing. Life is a swirling impressionist painting hidden behind what appears to be ordinary existence. Be the blank canvas.*

Yes—that's basically my point!

Sigh and roll your eyes all you want. The reason I emphasize this so much is because most people are inclined to question their ability, talent, skills and the possession of some extra sense or genius.

I've seen it at business meetings when the chief executive calls upon his staff to be creative, causing faces to turn pale, and some to vacate the room, suddenly remembering that there was something important that they should be doing.

What drives these people into a panic? The belief that it takes a certain kind of person to peel back the layers of existence to see the swirling van Gogh sky.

Let's consider this gargantuan wrench we throw into the machinery of our imagination: self-doubt. With certainty comes confidence, yet haven't I been instructing you not to cling to knowing everything? What gives? Your certainty should arise from the reasonable belief that if you call the ideas forth, they will come. Here kitty-kitty-kitty.

The cat that emerges from the hat may look more like a goose and sound like the rotors of a helicopter and smell like vanilla, but with knowing, glowing assurance you can smile with delight, expecting that the strange thing will indeed appear and greet you. You reply, *thing, I know not what you are, but I'm glad you came.*

One sign that the cat (or was it a goose?) is going to appear is that you've gotten off to a terrible start. Not only may a project begin badly, an entire series of endeavors could prove to be cataclysmic failures. But once you get off that pock marked runway and climb to thirty thousand feet, aside from a little turbulence, you'll

soar as high as you want to.

How does this work?

Well, I've got a theory. It's not very scientific, but one that's growing on me:

Show life that you're serious.

Although some creative endeavors start off well, perhaps even magically, usually the artist works very hard to bring the mystery forth into existence, toiling with a mess of stubborn clay. Every hurdle, obstacle, setback, failure and disappointment will test your inner resolve and faith in the realization of a dream. People will say that there's no such thing as a goose-cat, but with great determination, you can declare, *there is—you will see!*

Don't ever doubt yourself. The self isn't even the part that matters. My 'self' is just like any other 'self,' clueless and craving security, answers, health, prosperity and good fortune.

Faith in the intelligence of the universe, the mysteries of angels, the yet to be carved sculpture hidden in the marble, the discoveries that haven't been discovered, the realizations that haven't been made, is the spell, incantation and prayer we utter to call forth the impossible.

Please allow me to share a quote I treasure from the 1998 film, Shakespeare in Love.

Philip Henslowe: Mr. Fennyman, allow me to explain about the theatre business. The natural condition is one of insurmountable obstacles on the road to imminent disaster.

Hugh Fennyman: So what do we do?

Philip Henslowe: Nothing. Strangely enough, it all turns out well.

Hugh Fennyman: How?

Philip Henslowe: I don't know. It's a mystery.

As the creative person, you may find that often your job is simply to record ideas and get someone else to pick up where you leave off.

When I was a product designer, one of my favorite expressions was to *turn the keys over* to the programmers. After creating graphics, conceiving a workflow and some rudimentary coding, it would be a relief to me that someone much smarter than me, usually a software engineer, would turn my ideas and designs into a full blown database driven, dynamic monster of scripting language and logic.

The same could be said for the editors and proofreaders, once I finished a novel—or a gallery owner that can sell one of my paintings after I've done the easy work of creating. All these things involve the power of organized effort, allowing others to do the things that you might find challenging.

The trend for modern visual artists is to employ a team of assistants to create large scale paintings and sculptures. It is not uncommon to hear people criticize artists that don't actually have a hand in their own creations, but it's not that different from movie directors depending upon the talent of hundreds of people.

So look at this way, if those shameless rascals get all the credit for the work of many, why can't you come up with an idea and hope that others will bring it to life in some worthy manner.

You're every bit as brilliant as the owner of the perfume company, who employs hundreds of chemists, walking into a laboratory and sniffing a vile and approving of an aroma. The fashion designer that scribbles the shape of a dress and hands it to the dressmakers. The Chief Creative Officer that thinks of an idea while having coffee, calls the marketing department into his office to announce his plans, and then puts his feet back up on the desk to read his newspaper after everyone is gone.

What do these people have that you probably don't? Power.

Again, you're just as creative as anyone else. The ideas don't even come from you, but somewhere out beyond the great beyond. Do what you can in this life to form friendships, partnerships and working relationships with others. Get well connected and never give up until the right people show up to help. Strangely enough, things will turn out well. It's a mystery.

Oh, and another thing. Be patient, don't force it.

Summary: Notice that the splendor of life is not hidden, but in plain sight. Embrace not knowing. Don't doubt yourself. Network with others and search for help and collaborative opportunities.



## IMAGINING

## CREATIVE BLOCK

*“Art reaches its greatest peak when devoid of self-consciousness. Freedom discovers man the moment he loses concern over what impression he is making or about to make.”*

—Bruce Lee

Here it is—the creative block chapter. Hopefully you didn’t skip past the question mark at the bottom of the ocean, impeccable readiness, Jurassic apparitions and delicate confabulations, or you’ll have missed the importance of being slightly ridiculous.

Depending on how you look at it, I’m either the most or least qualified to write about the topic of creative block since I rarely experience it. Nevertheless, I will sally forth and begin my discourse on knocking down the brick wall that keeps you paralyzed like the sting of a Death Stalker Scorpion.

Let’s begin with the following quote:

*“Every now and then go away, have a little relaxation, for when you come back to your work your judgment will be surer. Go some distance away because then the work appears smaller and more of*

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*it can be taken in at a glance and a lack of harmony and proportion is more readily seen.”*

— Leonardo da Vinci

I could simply direct the frustrated creatives to the words of da Vinci and leave it at that. However, many people insist that if they were to step away from their work every time they experienced creative block, they would never get anything done.

Is it because of a lack of motivation? Can someone be genuinely uninspired and unable to write, paint, program, compose or invent? Does the mind simply get stuck sometimes and require someone to jumpstart the batteries?

Although there could be a multitude of explanations for the creative mind to blow a gasket and sit idly on the side of the road (all right, enough of the engine analogies), the root cause could have something to do with insecurity and perfectionism. That’s why it’s a valid piece of advice for someone experiencing writer’s block to grant themselves permission to write rubbish for a while.

Perfectionism is a form of self-hatred. Self-hatred is a form of insecurity. Insecurity is a lack of confidence. If you’re not confident about your work, you’ll overcompensate by trying too hard or expecting too much. Inherent in the creative’s inability to record their thoughts or impressions on paper, canvas or digital media is the fear that something won’t be good or perfect enough.

Consider this scenario: Someone has something important to tell you—news that may bring profound revelation. What if the person were to present this information in the most elaborate and remarkable dissertation? They begin with a thousand word preface expressing private wishes, citing references and continuing on to parts one and two of a dedication, followed by a long winded tale ending with the words, and thus concludes my masterpiece.

Would you be thinking to yourself, yes—this person has proved to me their genius and excellence? Or would you rather that the person had spoken plainly to you? I’m sure you would opt for sincerity over pretentiousness. As a creative, your aim should never be greatness, but rather, honesty and plainness.

*Even in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before) you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it.*

—C. S. Lewis

Whatever you do, lay the foundation or cornerstone with straightforward sentiments. Get to the heart of what you're trying to express and use a minimalist approach to jotting down the sentence, making the sketch or writing the notes in a measure. You can always go back later and dress up your work in lovely attire.

Let your creativity be motivated by honesty. When producing work intended to challenge others by shifting their consciousness or causing them to question their views, do so with upmost candor and openness. When conjuring the absurd for the purpose of humor, do it with earnest and honest intentions. When expressing sensuality, anger, dissent or veneration, let it be an authentic expression of what you feel inside.

Seeking an honest and straightforward approach will quickly help you get at what or if you have something to say. If you're not even sure if that you have a message or anything worthwhile to express, ask yourself if there is something within that closer resembles emotion or intuition. Your inner light is the one thing that can cause you to stand out like a legitimate voice in history, leading people to wonder where you have found the audacity to be different, determined and courageous.

Once you have authored a draft, made a sketch, written the outline of a technical white paper, or conceived of a basic plan, feel free to go into perfectionist mode, refining and polishing until you're happy. You don't need to know how it all ends or be able to envision the finished product, but if you begin simply and honestly, you'll find that you have tremendous momentum to carry you far.



A few practical tidbits of advice from personal experience...

When I'm writing and feel stuck, I'll go to the previous sentence and read it again to see if an idea will pop into my head (intentionally distracting myself and dividing my attention). If that doesn't work, I'll go to the beginning of a paragraph and start reading. If I'm still unable to come up with something to write, I'll start reading the chapter, or previous chapter and so on.

If the ideas still won't come, you may need to try a version of the da Vinci approach in which you get away from your work by doing something different such as checking email or reading an article.

If you work from home and have the opportunity to take a nap, that's the perfect way to reboot your head. Or you may try getting further and further away by watching a movie or reading a book. Drama may fuel your imagination and ignite your creativity.

The opposite may also work. Try listening to a boring talk given by someone at a conference. There are plenty of videos online on a variety of topics that may skirt the fringes of the useful but uninteresting. As your mind starts to wonder—voilà—an idea hits you.

When painting, I've noticed that physically holding a mirror from time to time seems to shift my attention so that I notice errors in my proportions as I study the reflection. I used to think that this had something to do with right brain and left brain balancing, but neurologists maintain that having separate creative and logical hemispheres of the brain is a myth or at least an extreme oversimplification.

Nevertheless, the mirror works wonders for visual corrections. If you're using a graphics program, horizontally flip the image periodically to help you notice any weaknesses in the layout or composition.

As to what I do when I'm not sure what to render or paint. As I mentioned early in the book, I can spend hours online looking at the work of other artists until I'm overflowing with inspiration. The local museum or gallery may not be exhibiting the kind of work that you identify with or hits the spot, but there's no shortage of .jpgs on the internet.

In the practical world of graphic design, web design or product design you're essentially an extension of marketing and advertising.

With project deadlines comes stress and other factors that may not be conducive to creativity, yet the finished work is obligatory.

The rock star, Sting, once explained the difference between jazz and pop music. He said that in jazz, a musician has time to explore, but in pop, one must ‘burn from the first bar.’ And so it is with high pressure situations. The artist, writer, designer, or anyone on the more commercial side of things must begin an immediate burn.

Interestingly, I’ve found that under pressure, when forced to design graphics or conceive of workflows, creative block is never an issue. It becomes a race against time, choosing the best possible idea and developing it. Call it a sink or swim reflex.

Even more interestingly, I’ve noticed that most of the time, the very first element I stumble upon when putting together a project, works perfectly. With astounding success, pieces of the puzzle fall into place when I limit my scrutiny and decision making, unassumingly throwing parts together as if making the perfect soufflé and nothing can go wrong.

Call it destiny, divine intervention or coincidence, the very first stock photo you like is usually the one you end up using. If you don’t trust your instincts, you may end up wondering why you spent half a day scrolling through thumbnails of images when the very first one you spotted was perfect.

The same goes for the very first thing you think of. Rather than dismissing it and ruminating for hours in an attempt to come up with something better, run with what you’ve got.

Author, Douglas Adams, wrote about a spaceship with an improbability drive. In the story, the ship is about to be destroyed by two nuclear missiles. As a last resort, the improbability drive is turned on, which creates the possibility of infinite consequences including the death of the crew. Fortunately, one of the missiles turns into a whale and the other, a bowl of petunias.

A creative person should possess a type of improbability drive in which random and seemingly pointless ideas emerge to form a pallet of colors, moves in a dance or musical phrases in a competition. It’s better to have a plethora of content to work with than a perfectionist’s whittling away of ideas that aren’t ‘good enough.’

Never underestimate your ability to be creative under high pressure situations. As I've mentioned before, the person that truly wishes not to do something will find a million excuses. Have you ever done that? Pat yourself on the back—you're a genius!

Whether you call yourself a genius is entirely up to you. John Lennon once famously said he was a genius. "Yes. If there is such a thing as one, I am one." Although he was referring to artistic genius, most of us—including me—would never make such a claim since we weren't the class valedictorian or someone that performs brain surgery or predicts the behavior of black holes.

But just as you're able to conjure up excuses, tell lies or exaggerate yours or someone else's strengths, the genius is there lurking just beneath the surface. However, only you can draw it forth.

If there were a method or technique to tapping into the your inner virtuosity, there would be schools churning out millions of genius graduates. Your job is to get out of your own way and allow things to happen. The more of a stumbling, accident prone, risk taking—open to all possibilities daydreamer you become, the more your ideas will burst forth from the big question mark at the bottom of the ocean.

Another aspect you may want to consider is a playful attitude. Think of the gleam in the eye of the attorney that has formulated a shrewd defense for his client. Perhaps the lawyer likes to argue for a living. Imagine the delight he feels when using his powers of persuasion to convince others to accept a clever contention. Or the politician that uses the day's news to his or her advantage, spinning it to prove a point. The hardest part might be to keep from grinning with self-satisfaction.

In the same way, *you* have a certain way of seeing things, a world view or instinct about life and the nature of humanity, the arts and experiences we all share. You should delight in conveying your colors, shapes, sounds, emotions and impressions of life on earth.

Let every person that ever meets you walk away inspired, moved, challenged or suddenly thoughtful about reality and the human imagination, knowing that you have thus successfully articulated your world and perceptions.

Have fun spinning the facts, exaggerating, persuading and

entertaining as you stand on your stage and declare: Ladies and gentlemen, the world according to me!

As the creative person you have—yes you’ve guessed it—creative license. There is no board of trustees, elders, committee, voting district or laws you need to adhere to. You are accountable to no one! Like that last sentence? I’ll say it again. You are accountable to no one!

Of course, the publisher may look at you in horror, and the financier of the dance company may do the same. Your art patron’s eyes may say *I thought I knew you*. The supervisor may shriek. The investor may threaten to cause you grievous bodily harm. Or an agent may suggest a lunch date with the dreaded words *are you feeling okay* or *we need to talk*. But at least you created something. You can always make changes, or in the worst case scenario, accept that your efforts were a disastrous failure. However, you can proudly proclaim that creative block had no hold over you.

A word on failure. Few things can cause emotional distress as rejection and disappointment. If it’s true as psychologists suggest, that emotional pain uses the same neural pathways as physical pain, then it might explain why sorrow ‘hurts’ so much.

It’s not uncommon for a creative person to become depressed after feeling that their work has been rejected. Depression is essentially a profound disappointment or discouragement.

Please note that usually with each failure, the quicker your recovery time. You might be able to get it down to about four days to bounce back from colossal fiascos (which is a heck of a lot better than six months).

You may be able quickly dismiss the minor catastrophes, but major disappointments make it quite hard to shake off the sting. On a conscious level, you’ll be aware that all is well. However, the subconscious is quite adversely affected by failure. The physical symptoms of depression such as insomnia, stomach problems and body aches may persist, even if you’re feeling outwardly happy.

The fact that you’re reading this book and interested in imagining, indicates that you are a sensitive and thoughtful individual.



Any proclivity toward angst and neurosis may actually be a friend in disguise.

We've all heard about the tortured lives of artists, writers and musicians. Dostoyevsky grew up with a violent alcoholic father. Tennessee Williams spent his childhood battling diphtheria and the cruelty of his father. Van Gogh was a shy boy that battled low self-esteem and epilepsy. Brian Wilson, considered one of the greatest songwriters of all time, grew up with an abusive father and alcoholic mother. On and on we could go.

Others experience perfectly happy childhoods, but may have a bipolar disorder or never have attained self-worth or struggle with some great unknown. Regardless, the fact that you're broken and flawed can be the very thing that makes you passionate, relentless and extraordinary—am I repeating myself? Good. You need to hear it.

Now that I've attempted to boost your confidence, do you still feel the sense that you need to somehow be perfect or adhere to a high standard in order to be creative?

Don't be surprised if your mind sabotages your efforts to feel adequate by introducing a whole new set of objections: I've never done much with my life...I don't really have that many interesting experiences and memories to draw upon...I have nothing to write about...I don't know what to paint...I'm drawing a blank...who am I to think that I can actually invent something new?

Oh the creative block may be strong with some, but let me put what I've said before a different way. You need to step away from the literal and enter the realm of make-believe.

Think of how light enters our eyes. The lens focuses light and the retina receives an image transforming it into electrical impulses that are carried by the optic nerve into the brain. You never actually see the sky, horizon or person in front of you. Your experience is entirely an electronic representation of reality.

Are you usually aware of these things? No. As human beings we are in the business of symbols, representations and metaphors. It's not only the language of fantasy but the closest way we have to describing the physical universe.

One more thing, if you've ever experience brain fog, try eating something. Up to 20% of the energy your body uses powers the brain. Sometimes what we think is creative block is simply low blood

sugar or sleep deprivation.

## BLINCILS

Here's a thought experiment. Imagine vertical blinds in a window. Replace the slats with yellow number 2 pencils, sharpened and with erasers at the end. Which way looks better, points up or down? Can you substitute in your mind pencils for window blinds? Now let's give them a new name? How about blincils? Can you imagine knocking on someone's door and introducing yourself as a blincil salesperson?

You're invited into a living room and soon presenting your best sales pitch, listing the many benefits of having brand new blincils. The old window blinds—ahem—blincils, have been deteriorating in the sun for years. The powdery residue is a carcinogen. Image a child licking those old yellowing blincils. Perish the thought! Each window in the house needs a new set of blincils—immediately!

The homeowner agrees but is curious as to why you call them blincils. Because of the giant pencils hanging from the headrail, you state with one raised eyebrow and a look of stupendous pride.

Of course there aren't any actual pencils, so after a moment, you shrug and sigh and tell the story of the great writing instrument shortage of 1908. The living room fades away and you find yourself on a rocky coast during a winter storm. A ship nears with a cargo of fountain pens and wooden pencils. A large wave tosses the vessel about until it's smashed upon the rocks. All is lost.

However, an old sea captain swims to shore and greets you. You stare at the wet blue uniform decorated with dripping literary medals and ask if anyone will ever be able to write anything again. You receive the following reply:

"There's no such thing as writer's block or creative block or anything of the sort. Don't you see? Everything is a symbol or representation. Think about it and then notice that you are thinking. And then notice the self that notices the self thinking. You'll soon find that together we can do anything, you and me—your higher self.

'Let's build a mansion by the sea, invite many guests and celebrate our splendid imagination. To think that there was any such thing as writing instrument shortage was quite a mental achievement.

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And so was the belief that there could ever be anything termed creative block.'

'No such thing?' you ask.

'Only the ones made of pencils. How else would you explain not being able to open the blinds to look out the window?'

Summary: Avoid perfectionism. Be honest and straightforward. Often the thing we're looking for is the very first thing we see. High pressure situations can lead to creative results. Be playful. Your lack of imagination can actually be your imagination, imagining that there is a lack of imagination.



## VIRAL MONA LISA

*“I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer.”*

— Jim Carrey

*“True freedom comes from being unknown.”*

— Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*

We're getting close to the end, my magnificent imaginers and seekers of the ineffable! You've managed to make it through a low brow explanation of the creative process, me behind the wheel, and you in the passenger's seat, brooding with interest (hopefully—and not nodding off).

Were you expecting a more scientific approach, examining dopaminergic and serotonergic processes, and all sorts of new academic findings? (All right, I'll throw in a little science in this chapter.)

My treatise on the subject has been a kind of stream of consciousness conversation with you—all the advice I could think of to tell a friend based on my years of silence followed by content—shutting my mind off and then turning it back on again, ignoring all

the negative stuff.

If you have any doubts about setting free your imagination, think of musicians that effortlessly produce copious quantities of music when they're young, but as they grow older, despite having much knowledge, wisdom and experience, are at a loss to explain how they once did it back when all seemed magical and the songs would seem write themselves. Call it beginners luck or the feeling that anything is possible because you simply don't know any better, right now, you can also do something incredible.

The film, *Citizen Kane*, is often hailed by critics as the greatest motion picture ever made. Personally, I've never understood what all the fuss was about, yet I find it amusing that Orson Welles had never directed before and simply threw together all the elements of filmmaking that he liked most from watching other movies. Talk about not being ruined by film school!

John Grisham's first novel, *A Time to Kill*, which initially bombed, later became his most popular novel, and considered by many his best. There are countless writers that never experienced success until much later in life, but all in all, it's principally a culture phenomenon. The work may be great, but sometimes it takes a long time for something to happen to cause people to appreciate it.

Think about the reason the Mona Lisa is the most famous painting in the world. In 1911, it was stolen from the Louvre. That's it. A simple case of newsworthiness. Of course, it was always a great painting, but until the robbery, most people had never heard of it.

There are many reasons for heightened acclaim and acceptance such as fads, fashion, recommendations by thought leaders, social media influencers and celebrities. However, the actual means by which something receives widespread acceptance is usually the last thing anyone expects. Therefore, strive for creations that satisfy your spirit and let your imagination proceed without any regard for recognition.

*Yes, I understand that art should be created for its own sake, but there must be some recognition for my work that makes everything worthwhile, or at least some applause at the end of my life that brings tears of happiness. Don't you think so?*

If you're particularly successful in your creative efforts, you may

find that indeed many people will flock to you as the very embodiment of talent and artistry, unaware of all the hard work and patience required to persist and endure when inspiration seems scarce and hardly anyone cares.

However, it is vitally important to understand how infrequent and unusual the marvel of major success is. Many who achieve it have been able to survive years of heart crushing failure and rejection. They persist when there is no logical reason to do so.

Unfortunately, the media shines a powerful spotlight on what is a rare phenomenon. Since most of us watch television and use the internet on a daily basis, our perceptions are considerably skewed, causing us to regard fame—the unusual and exceptional—as commonplace.

We continuously see images of the fabulously successful grinning, getting out of limos or private jets and having a generally amazing life. We're not shown the millions of failing and undiscovered artists of all varieties. If we could for a moment see the multitudes of frustrated and desperate people chasing their elusive dreams, we would conclude that it's quite neurotic behavior, not to mention, there's too high a price to pay.

You may know of frustrated creatives that have alienated family members or driven many others away, or have exploded with rage to the detriment of their own lives, resulting in public humiliation or prison. And then there are the suicides of those that gave themselves until a certain age to 'make it,' but were devastated to find that hard work was not enough. Or you may have known someone that had achieved stardom only to realize that it all meant very little to him or her.

That is why I want you to fall in love with creativity itself and not allow external circumstances to diminish your joy. Success should be like an ultra-wealthy person being told that he or she has inherited more money. In other words, it only slightly enhances your preexisting sense of contentment.

There is a theater (just a few hundred meters from my house) that is one of the venues of The Fort Lauderdale Film Festival. Every year, talented teams of film makers, after exhausting their time, talents, money and other untold resources, premiere their work to a

mostly empty room.

I wonder how many forget that their participation in the process was one of the most enjoyable and satisfying experiences of their lives. Yet, what can be worse than the silent treatment—bare seats mocking the audacity to dream? But isn't that the way it often is—expectations acting as a time bomb in the lives of what should be people who have satiated their creative determination? Beware of expectations.

But suppose you get lucky and someone *steals your Mona Lisa*—I hope that your creation doesn't rely solely on gimmickry or attention seeking and you have genuinely created something of extraordinary quality to be seen by many.

It is curious, however, how over time the spotlight has shifted away from the imaginer. At one time, novelists were the rock stars of their day. With motion pictures, actors became stars by interpreting the written word. In recent history, people have become famous simply for being and living thanks to reality television. And now, a social media influencer can make millions of dollars by posting a few seconds of video for their online subscribers.

You can get rich from fluff and superficiality, but I hope that you never yield to the temptation of sacrificing your artistic integrity. That's not to say that there is no imagination or creativity involved in silly internet videos, yet I think you can do better.

I'm glad that the makers of *Hamilton: An American Musical* worked so hard and with such passion to create a work of art heralded by many as a cultural phenomenon. I'm glad for every time I've binge-watched a series so well written and produced that I wish I could watch another hundred episodes. I'm glad for every meticulously crafted work of art that has caused me to stop and sort through my confusion, and question what I believe. I'm grateful for every blog I've ever read that somehow confirmed what I always suspected was true. And I'm most definitely grateful for every independent writer that has told a great story in absolute obscurity.

For the most part, the multitude of people that have inspired, entertained us and brought joy to our lives are not millionaires. I wouldn't want to live in a world where no one wanted to be a teacher, doctor, nurse or firefighter (to name a few noble professions) because inventing and creating were the sure methods of achieving affluence and opulence.



On the other hand, you shouldn't desire to 'make it big,' because you hate your job. If your sanity depends on escaping your daily method of paying bills, insurance, mortgage or rent, you should stop everything you're doing and evaluate your life, the way a political campaign goes into crisis mode by locking themselves in the 'war room,' and not coming out until they've decided on a new strategy to deal with a scandal.

You may have to stay or go back to school or teach yourself new skills. The goal should be to survive to fight another day. Life is difficult and you need to do whatever it takes to be around when the days of opportunity come. You never know when a phone call from a curator, director, editor or investor will result in a chance to exhibit, compose, express your thoughts in writing or create the website or company you have dreamt about.

I've found an interesting thing about life. Sometimes nothing happens for six months (or some other godawful period of time). Seemingly forsaken by friends and shunned by every person you attempt to contact, life turns its head away to ignore your existence.

You feel alone as the cold rain of irrelevance pours down upon you. You wouldn't mind a small meteor also falling on your head and erasing your seemingly insignificant existence. And then one day, everything seems to happen at once, including a chance to do something that fills you with excitement and hope.

Whether or not you become famous, you can have an extraordinary, happy and productive life, writing, drawing, composing, designing choreographic sequences, developing applications, inventing and starting businesses.

I'm not trying to discourage you. I only wish that you live a life free of illusions so that one day you don't regret making the mistakes that separate us from the people we love. Having a big dream in the back of your head of glorious outcomes can be just the right thing to motivate you and elevate your mood.

Creative visualization and believing in things like the law of attraction may actually be beneficial to your health and outlook on life. But don't ever assume that your joy depends on someone stealing your Mona Lisa or your video going viral.



If you do find yourself largely successful one day, don't be surprised if you don't feel so special or think that highly of your accomplishments. Some have actually developed imposter syndrome, a term referring to individuals that are convinced that they are not as talented as people perceive them to be and don't deserve the success they have achieved.

Truth be told, I felt a little that way when I was a product designer. I considered myself to be perpetually lucky that deadlines were met and projects well received. The management team of the corporation were practical business people after all, they wouldn't have an eye for design and aesthetics, or at least that was my suspicion for the reason behind the nods of approval.

Ignore anything that causes you to question your abilities. Even if a guy wearing a robe and pointy hat were to show up on your doorstep and zap all your skills and talents away, narrow your eyes with defiance as you shrug off the spiteful attack and commit to carrying out all your goals, accomplishing the impossible, and making all your dreams come true.

Consider Michael Faraday when you need inspiration to do the impossible. The great English scientist, famous for inventing the motor and discovering the principles of electromagnetism, suffered an illness at midlife which prevented him from doing any work for more than three years.<sup>iii</sup> The memory loss and depression persisted for the rest of his life, yet he continued to invent and discover.

Imagine losing your mind or talent or skill, and still refusing to ever stop doing whatever it takes to carry on with your work.

*Here's a little science for you (I warned you):* If you perpetually hear the voice of negative self talk, engage in the act of 'synaptic pruning,' by which you mark certain mental activity for deletion.<sup>iv</sup>

There are specific cells that actually remove the synaptic connections that you don't use. In other words, the things you don't think about get tossed. The things that occupy your attention will form a powerful and beautifully functioning neuro-circuit in your brain.

Switch your brain's ingenious and creative ability to be

pessimistic, self-loathing, cynical, and self-doubting to focusing on being who you really are. Who are you? Well, let me give you a partial retort.

If you're a pastry maker, you get up in the morning, go to work and make pastries—the most delicious and sublime, puffy and flaky cinnamon rolls and danishes. If you install cabinetry, take pride in knowing that the fine thread drywall screws have pierced the metal studs and those cupboards are never going to come crashing down. The same applies to the creative, the daydreamer, the imaginer—you. (What you do is not the sum total of who you are, but it's an important part. The metaphysics of your consciousness are for another time and book.)

Think about the things that will help you attain the mastery of your craft. Think about the goals that you want to set for yourself. Think about the nuances, fundamentals and higher aspects of creating, composing, inventing and innovating. But whatever you do, don't think about the rejections, discouragements, worries and failures.

Ignore them, and as I mentioned before, certain cells will mark the synaptic connections with a protein, and the pruning cells will bond to them and destroy these proliferators of gloom (i.e. the things you ignore will eventually get marked for deletion). Researchers are only beginning to understand how this works, but they assure us that unwanted junk can be removed from your brain.

Whether you are the baker, carpenter, artist or inventor, much of your purpose in life is to be who you are. Many, after a lifelong search for answers, have come to the conclusion that doing and being are one. As the old saying goes: Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.

The question some may want to consider is, what are you waiting for? I've often heard people tell me that they would like to go back to school and earn a few more degrees before they embark on their artistic journey. They've experienced inspiration, their hearts are overflowing with the desire to create and live the life of an artist or composer or entrepreneur. But somehow, a little voice works its way to conscious thought and tries to restrain them from proceeding. Not yet! It cries in protest.

The person, completely unaware of how proficient the mind is at sabotaging dreams, acquiesces and—with a soul emptying sigh—tells

him or herself that much needs to take place before taking the first step. And so begins the illusionary need for more musical equipment, art supplies, literary workshops, financial backers and classes, classes, classes.

You. Marvelous you—are a creative. The ideas will come from some mysterious place you know nothing about. You may eventually take credit for them, but they don't belong to any one person. They float around in the ether descending upon anyone who is receptive and willing to play make-believe.

Think of yourself as the pastry maker or artist—working as you breathe in inspiration. And just as you're not really conscious of the actions of your lungs, everything is functioning perfectly. You're living your purpose.

## MEANING

We're only human. The phrase usually comes from an acknowledgement and acceptance of our shortcomings. Some examples include making mistakes or weaknesses in character or self-control. Other examples of 'being human' may involve a lack of skill or talent, coordination or cognitive ability. There are many things humans are inherently bad at such as our sense of smell and the digestion of cellulose, but I digress.

One thing that you may not often think about is how bad humans are at tolerating boredom or meaninglessness. In the same way an insecure person may demonstrate arrogance, many people who sense that their lives don't quite make sense or lack significance overcompensate by making themselves feel important.

Right now, somewhere in the world there might be a young man longing for significance by putting on a suicide vest. Somehow, joining a cause and committing a mass killing is preferable to not feeling important. How strange that the human mind can't bear irrelevance and inconsequence.

In a more innocuous fashion, a man may work himself to heart disease or early death for the words *Vice President* to be printed on his corporate business card. If there are no ill effects for his quest to feel important, he may find one day that the title or position does little to quench his thirst for meaning and significance.

Throughout history, there have been many that have had a life crisis of sorts, the result of the human inability to accept meaninglessness. Perhaps some time in midlife, a person suddenly wonders what's the use in getting up in the morning if nothing seems to matter. What has everything been for? —The accomplishments realized, undisputed victories, unrequited loves and broken dreams— Is this all there is to life?

It is the child within that needs to remind the lost soul: the world is an exquisite playground. Let's have a blast and play, create, conjure and explore. The loving relationships and passions we engage in are our joy, laughter and the very nectar of life, as well as our personal faith and knowledge that we are cherished.

A title on a business card or a plan to detonate a bomb may make someone feel important, but it will never come close to providing true purpose or significance. Neither will having awards or fame. Meaninglessness, on the other hand, is to be a happy child once again, untainted by aspirations of importance, the lust for attention or the need to prove anything to anyone.

If you question the virtue of meaninglessness, think of extremists, ideologues, activists and hacktivists and ask yourself if perhaps some aspirations, however well meaning, are motivated by self-importance. You'd be surprised how much can go to someone's head.

Indeed, many causes are worthwhile and genuinely inspired by love of others, but it is good to at least be aware of what role the ego plays in our benevolence and compassions. Meaninglessness, however, ensures that our care and kindness is undefiled by presumption and delusions of grandeur.

A fanatic may successfully replace their propensity for crime, addiction or emotional imbalance for a cause or belief, but the chasing after idols persists. The search for the feeling of importance is a fruitless building upon the superstructure of the ego.

## THE 0.0086 PERCENT

A few more words about fame, since it seems to be one of the major things that motivate people to create stuff. This book could also be titled, *Don't Be Famous*. So I'll beat this dead horse some more (Tip:

don't use clichés like beat a dead horse when writing fiction).

Those who rise to the very top of their craft are inevitably asked the question, 'what advice would you give...?' To which they almost always respond with something like, 'Give it all you've got, believe in yourself and don't ever give up.' They're being completely honest, since this has been their personal experience.

You may be urged by a friend to 'never give up.' Implicit in this statement is that if you try hard, one day you'll be famous or arrive at something of great consequence. What is there to give up? A creative does the thing he or she loves and keeps doing it as long as he or she is physically able. It is a way of life. Internally, the soul is satisfied—externally, some things will be rejected, ignored or well received.

Like the many artists, scientists and inventors that were honored long after their death (acceptance and notoriety matters little to them now), the true creative will never consider their work to be part of a task that can ever be given up or subject to a popularity contest that determines worth.

Please don't ever do anything for fame. According to one source, only 0.0086 percent of people in the world are famous.<sup>v</sup> Creatives may fair slightly better, but prominence and notoriety is too rare a phenomenon to waste our short lives pursuing.

*Do not care overly much for wealth or power or fame, or one day you will meet someone who cares for none of these things, and you will realize how poor you have become.*

—Ruyard Kipling

Here's an announcement to post on the café bulletin board: Consider joining the community of artists, poets, inventors, choreographers, novelists, painters, entrepreneurs, composers and every person that practices the art of imagining. We're part of the 99.99 percent—obscure and perhaps insignificant. So what. We love what we do and do what we love. And that's enough for us.

Siddhārtha Gautama once said that desire is the cause of suffering. Much mental anguish arises simply from the insistence upon having what we perceive we lack. Although the heart of every true artist is to love and want to be loved, fame does not equal love. Just ask anyone that has achieved a bit too much stardom and they'll

tell you about the loneliness, depression, paranoia, body shaming and cyber bullying that makes them want to wear a baseball cap and sunglasses for the rest of their lives.

What if we were a bit like an enlightened sage? Not only unfazed by circumstances, but maybe taking it a step further—living in a constant state of excitement and joy centered upon creativity. You might witness an interesting phenomenon: just the right number of fans, followers and disciples spring up to do something quite peculiar—reflect the love you feel within.

‘In the end the love you take is equal to the love you make’ is the last lyric on the last album ever recorded by the Beatles. Although there are multiple interpretations of this line, I like to think that it means something about the love of creating. And whether it’s just an illusion or perhaps the most relevant truth in existence, when you’re in love, life is amazing.

In the same way that the more expensive a placebo is, the better it will work, the magic in your life depends on your ability to believe that you already possess everything you could ever want. After all, you are one of the few listening intently to the question mark at the bottom of the ocean, waiting for something astounding to emerge. And...you may be surprised to find that within meaninglessness, you find the very meaningful.

Even better yet, there’s so much left for you to create, compose, invent and imagine. Believe, believe, believe. Your life of color, sounds, textures, tastes, aromas and people to love is a miracle. Be grateful.

The concept of meaninglessness is by no means a denial that there is a grand order to the universe. Meaning and purpose, in an absolute sense, seem to permeate the fabric of existence (as far as what I have been able to tell). Call me unscientific or a flake—I’ve observed meaningful coincidences happen with great regularity as well as the occurrence of perfectly timed major life events. Whether or not you agree with me, or perhaps this is not your experience whatsoever, let us consider solely the individual and not the cosmic mysteries for now.

Beyond implications of karma and grace, we are simple creatures that, for the most part, find that much of life is not in our control. Sometimes our lives may seem pointless; however, the desperate search for significance and purpose mostly leads to the constructing

of false identities. That's not to say that the search itself won't lead you to some interesting places.

The expressions *nothing is by chance* and *everything happens for a reason* may be indelibly true, but don't attempt to manufacture false meaning as means to self-importance. Create for creation's sake and if your Mona Lisa remains unstolen a little while longer, remember that your work was great long before a million people lined up to tell you so.

To be clear, much of life is meaningful, but the preoccupation with personal meaning can have a discouraging and dispiriting affect. Rather than demanding meaning, embrace mystery. Mystery is the source of all true inspiration, spirituality, romance, passion and excitement.

Summary: Get rid of unproductive thoughts by ignoring them or not dwelling upon them. Continually focus on things that will improve your skills and creativity. Do not chase after the feeling of importance.





## CONCLUSION

*“You may say I’m a dreamer  
But I’m not the only one.”*

—John Lennon

I can’t end *Imagining* without exploring just a tad bit more what it means to believe in oneself. Years ago, an associate pastor of a church took me out to lunch one day (I think he did this at times out of concern for my mental health). I brought up the works of C. S. Lewis and casually made a comment about the author’s creative and intellectual genius.

The pastor responded with something like: *‘What makes Lewis different from people like us is the ability to form more thoughtful connections, blab, blab, blab...’*

*People like us?* I thought to myself. It seemed very convenient (or something of a creative cop-out) to elevate a person to greatness, put them on a pedestal and distance ourselves from their capabilities. As far as I’m concerned, the ability to write about a land of talking

animals and mythical creatures lays dormant in all of us.

*Speak for yourself!* My mind telepathically beamed (pointlessly) through glaring eyes. *Nothing is impossible if you try hard enough!*

According to research by Stanford University Professor of Psychology, Carol Dweck, people have one of two mindsets: fixed or growth.<sup>vi</sup> Those with a fixed mindset believe that their success is based on innate ability, and others with a growth mindset believe that their success is based on hard work, learning and persistence.

It's tempting to believe that some individuals are more special than *the rest of us*, but I'm inclined to consider that although there are examples of people naturally predisposed toward certain abilities (thus giving them some measure of an advantage) you can't count out a fighter with heart.

Fixed mindsets and the assumption that one lacks the creativity gene or potential for excellence is an negative belief that needs to be substituted with optimism. For every inspiration that drives one toward creativity, doubts arise out of insecurity.

A simple solution is to bypass the mind—especially the act of decision making—and push oneself into the work one might love without regard for ability or the myriad of things to be considered, focusing on one micro step at a time.

Seems kind of reckless and imprudent? But it's the thing that speaks to your heart and offers purpose and lifelong satisfaction—a vital part of being, that if you resist, you'll almost certainly regret one day.

What's keeping you? Could it be your past? Are you attached to what you've done before—how you've always been perceived—an identity that you yourself formed long ago? Is it debilitating self-pity—the kind that keeps you in a perpetual state of discouragement and inaction? Whatever disability, handicap, timidity, mental or emotional disorder you have—it's not an excuse. You can't let it be.

Granted, if I'm tone deaf—I'm not going to enter a reality singing competition or try out for an Olympic team if I'm old and have never had an ounce of athletic ability in my entire life (Notice these examples are closer to things that involve skill, talent and artistry rather than creativity and imagination).

But at some level—entertaining lucid and sober self-analysis—you should have a sense of what you're suited for—what craft or discipline fits you like a glove. Not necessarily something that comes

to you easily, but rather a type of inner experience that you can lose yourself in for what might seem like eternity. You may have to work harder than others to attain skills, but your imagination can burst forth as pure genius with little effort.

If you can't sing, you can be a songwriter. The vocalist may have tremendous talent, but the lyricist and composer is by far more creative. If you can't dance, you can be a choreographer. Many choreographers that can't actually execute dance moves are able to imagine them. If you can't act, you can be a playwright. There's no need to be attractive or charismatic to be a writer. Even a sickly introverted wordsmith can bring forth worlds with awesome power and majesty. If you can only draw stick figures, good! You can be a modern artist or do things in such a unique, unorthodox or even clumsy manner that that the world gets to see something truly original. If you can't run fast enough to make the team—coach.

In short, if you're unable to achieve the quality of artistry or lack talent, try your hand at imagining and creating. It may be like giving up on searching for silver and finding diamonds.

*But the athlete, singer, dancer and actor get all the glory and credit*, you might say. So what? It's the kind of world we live in—where fame and celebrity are worshipped and substance is undervalued.

Besides, as I mentioned before, there's a considerable cost to stardom. Far more important than getting everyone in the world to love you is finding your inner joy and purpose. The applause will fade, but if you unlock the secret to happiness it won't matter.

Dream big, visualize and manifest, but make sure that what you create in this world is of utmost quality, excellence, beauty, brilliance and profundity. If you chase after the world, you'll circle it and end up where you started, feeling unfulfilled and insignificant. However, if you delve deep within, you can find six essential truths:

## 1

You're unique. Not *just* unique, but something far greater. You're the best person in the world at being you. Delight in revealing to others *life according to you*. And if no one seems to care, it's only because people live busy and hectic lives.

Your creativity is like finding the love of your life—the one that makes all the pain and challenges of this world well worth the grief. You may sometimes take your love for granted, but what would life

be without your imagination and the drive to make something out of nothing? Be you. A receiver of ideas, developer of talent and a maker of art. That's the person in the mirror.

## 2

There is no one thing that is your 'calling.' You're not going to suddenly realize one day that there is a specific art form or skill that comes easily to you and causes everything in your life to fall into place. There are however, seasons of new discoveries—extra ingredients to add to your soup of delectables.

My first love was painting, but then my outlet for creative expression turned toward music for a time (extremely beneficial and therapeutic in my youth) and then back to painting. One day, I discovered web design and made a career out of it, eventually becoming a product designer. Along the way, I became a novelist. After getting to know my publisher, I started designing book covers. Perhaps one day I'll be a motivational guru, since I happen to enjoy public speaking.

Don't limit the possibilities. Life is a smorgasbord of delights, a medley of melodies and a variety of games to play. The question is whether you can get past the beginning stage when something is still unfamiliar and intimidating. Once you become good at something, you'll be grateful that you broke through the initial barrier that once seemed so impenetrable.

## 3

You are extremely lovable. No matter what your external mannerisms, idiosyncrasies, demeanor or appearance, inside is an ever changing person. Like a river that never holds the same water, your thoughts and emotions are constantly evolving. Don't define yourself by past mistakes, experiences or frustrations. At any given moment, you are a new person. Just as your cells are replaced every five days, regret and discouragement can instantly turn to motivation and hope.

If you haven't noticed, you're worthy of having someone in your life that cares greatly for you. Whether it's a spouse, family member, coach, mentor or close friend, being loved is one of the greatest things that can stimulate your imagination. Knowing that someone

believes in you makes it possible to dream and know that you are valued, no matter the outcome.

If someone close to you constantly criticizes and finds fault with you, you'll only accomplish half of what you're capable of. Don't believe anything they tell you. Guard yourself from the negativity of others and gravitate towards the people the cheer you on to excellence. After all, you're lovable and you deserve it.

If you're particularly fortunate, there might be someone in your life that exhibits a type of 'field effect.' You may sense a peaceful feeling radiating from such a person. The more time you spend with him or her, the more you are transformed. Pain and negativities dissolve as you're more able to reach your full potential.

#### 4

You love others. Even if you consider yourself to be selfish and self-obsessed, you care deeply about the human condition, condemning injustice and oppression, valuing human achievement and vicariously delighting in the vindication of the hated and maligned (I doubt that a sociopath lacking in empathy and love for neighbor would be reading this book).

Whether you know it or not, your life is inextricably interwoven with the lives of others, and perhaps at some unconscious level, your art is made for and intended for those you have observed, met or have yet to meet.

When writing novels, I've often stepped outside myself to imagine characters that think, act and speak differently than me. People who know me are probably surprised to find profanity, eroticism and violence in my narratives. To anyone who objects, I simply tell them they don't seem to understand art.

To create for the world, step outside yourself and seek to understand others. Much of art is telling other people's stories. It's not all about you. We're all in this together, and what you have to say overlaps with what others are thinking and feeling. You paint, write, choreograph, compose and invent because you care.

#### 5

You're doing great, except you get in your own way. Just as a pianist suddenly becoming conscious of his or her fingers during a

performance will result in a musical mishap, self-analysis will wreck your creative flow. Perhaps that is the original meaning of being self-conscious. Not only will self-analysis shut down your imagination, it will rob you of peace, joy and confidence.

One dreadful form of self-analysis is attempting to evaluate our own progress. The question, ‘am I getting better?’ or any conclusion you may draw regarding perceived improvement is not only pointless, but lethal to the creative process. Any form of self-analysis will have a similar effect. It will lead to artistic paralysis, negative self-talk, anxiety and doubt.

Your skills will improve over time regardless of how your gauge your progress. Obsessing over it will only increase the chances that you’ll get discouraged and throw your dreams away.

*If you hear a voice within you say 'you cannot paint,' then by all means paint, and that voice will be silenced.*

—Vincent Van Gogh

## 6

Like radio transmissions leaving the earth and going out into space (as depicted in the novel and movie, *Contact*), your imagination expands outward. By dreaming and visualizing, not only are you influencing yourself—your intentions, the plans you make and your future—, the world is being affected consciously and subliminally.

Inventions, if they’re not of the ‘happy accident’ variety, often start out as a thought or idea inside an individual’s head, well insulated from the outside world. But once expressed, they begin to influence reality.

Sometimes life imitates art. People are highly suggestable and a work of fiction, a painting or some other creation can cause them to be more compassionate or enlarge their system of beliefs to include more things that they accept or tolerate.

I once saw a painting of raindrops splashing in a pond. Whenever I see light rain causing ripples in water, I stop for a moment to stare. I don’t think I would ever do that unless I had seen that painting.

Sometimes I wonder if a hundred years from now, someone will find one of my paintings, maybe in a garage somewhere, and wonder

about the person that painted it. Maybe they'll smile and consider it one of life's tiny pleasures to look at original art. Or perhaps one day someone reading one of my stories will shed tears of happiness if such a thing hasn't already happened.

No matter what you say, write or do, you'll never know who your inspiring, swaying, persuading, entertaining or providing joy and laughter for.

*'Everything you can imagine is real.'*

—Pablo Picasso

Never underestimate the power of your imagination. There have been accounts of people that see supernatural beings, monsters and mythical creatures immediately after a manuscript of a novel or screenplay containing such things is finished—completely unaware of the existence of the writer or project. I'm a bit skeptical of such occurrences, nevertheless, I can't help but want to believe that our imaginations literally give birth to reality. You never know. It might just be possible.



Now that I've shared with you my thoughts on imagining, allow me to ask a favor of you:

Whether or not you consider yourself an imaginative person, the world is depending on you to be one. Many people seem to lack imagination. That's why wars are fought. If you were to find the best and the brightest individuals from the most prestigious institutions with the highest IQs and assembled them together to think *really really* hard for days and weeks, in all likelihood, the world would continue to rage on with violent conflicts. A simple decision and a few bay words can lead to billion dollar aircrafts opening their weapons bay doors releasing bombs over populated areas.

Think of the ingenuity it takes to design a stealth bomber that



can refuel in midair and attack invisibly at night. Yet, there's something more subtle to human intelligence than ingenuity and the ability to strategize and precision or saturation bomb an enemy into oblivion. Illusive and just beyond the grasp of normal consciousness is the genius and spirit of peacemaking.

No doubt, there are many peacemakers behind the scenes keeping the world from slipping into total chaos, otherwise most of the world leaders would be perpetually hanging their heads in shame, unable to explain why they don't have the intelligence to avoid war.

But since I'm optimistic, I believe that much greater things will happen—artists, writers and inventors and perhaps even someone that has never dabbled in dark arts of creativity will one day fall like a stone into water completely into their imaginations.

Out of this they will emerge with new human perception, one that sees the best in everything and infinitely more solutions than hopeless circumstances.

Perhaps, this perception will spread and humanity will no longer be limited by suspicion, paranoia or malice. You may argue that human nature is what it is, but is that not just a jaded automatic response?

Try imagining that you had great resourcefulness and vision and could see the answers as if hidden under a wooden crate that people pass every day as they turn a corner, deep in thought about the problems of the world. At least consider the possibility that solutions lay in plain sight and not assume that only a genius can find them.

Whatever you do, be the one with vision. Instead of quarrelling with an argumentative person, spend your time imagining and creating. Instead of designing bombs, chemical weapons, detainment camps and apparatuses of mass killing, be one less architect, manufacturer or purveyor of cynicism in the world.

If a corporation or government asks you to use your imagination to create something toxic or hurtful to another person physically, financially or emotionally, refuse. Your imagination is too valuable to waste on hate and ignorance.

If you were to fall completely into your imagination, and then one day another person, followed by many others, we wouldn't have to resort to waiting for quantum computing and human genetic engineering to solve our problems (if such a thing is possible). A critical mass of dreamers, visionaries and peacemakers would make it

palpable to the world that inspiration and love contain all the answers.

Please believe that you might just be capable of more than you ever thought. Use your imagination lovingly and wisely. Daydream and fantasize about make-believe worlds that provide sanctuaries for troubled souls. Stories that offer an escape to those experiencing a time in their lives of trials, debts, loneliness and pain. Inventions that spark a childlike enthusiasm and a sense of excitement. Art that challenges the mind or simply mirrors the beauty of nature. Dance performances and plays that lift spirits. Technology and media that remind us that human being are essentially the same everywhere in the world and despite our shortcomings, we are moving ever so gradually towards love and away from hate.

Once the discovery is made, the invention patented, the sculpture erected, the music recorded and the novel published, you can tell everyone the truth: It was all an accident. The ideas simply popped into your head. How? Things just have a way of working out. It's a mystery.

## IMAGINING

If you liked this book, please leave an Amazon.com customer review. They'll let you do that even if you didn't purchase the book. Go now and make something.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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