

A NEW WAY OF OPERATING

“Creativity is not a talent. It is a way of operating.”

—John Cleese

When I have the privilege of talking to my readers, the most common questions they ask me are about self-promotion. *How do I get my stuff out there? How do I get noticed? How do I find an audience? How did you do it?*

I hate talking about self-promotion. Comedian Steve Martin famously dodges these questions with the advice, “Be so good they can’t ignore you.” If you just focus on getting really good, Martin says, people will come to you. I happen to agree: You don’t really find an audience for your work; they find you. But it’s not enough to be good. In order to be found, you have to *be findable*. I think there’s an easy way of putting your work out there and making it discoverable *while* you’re focused on getting really good at what you do.

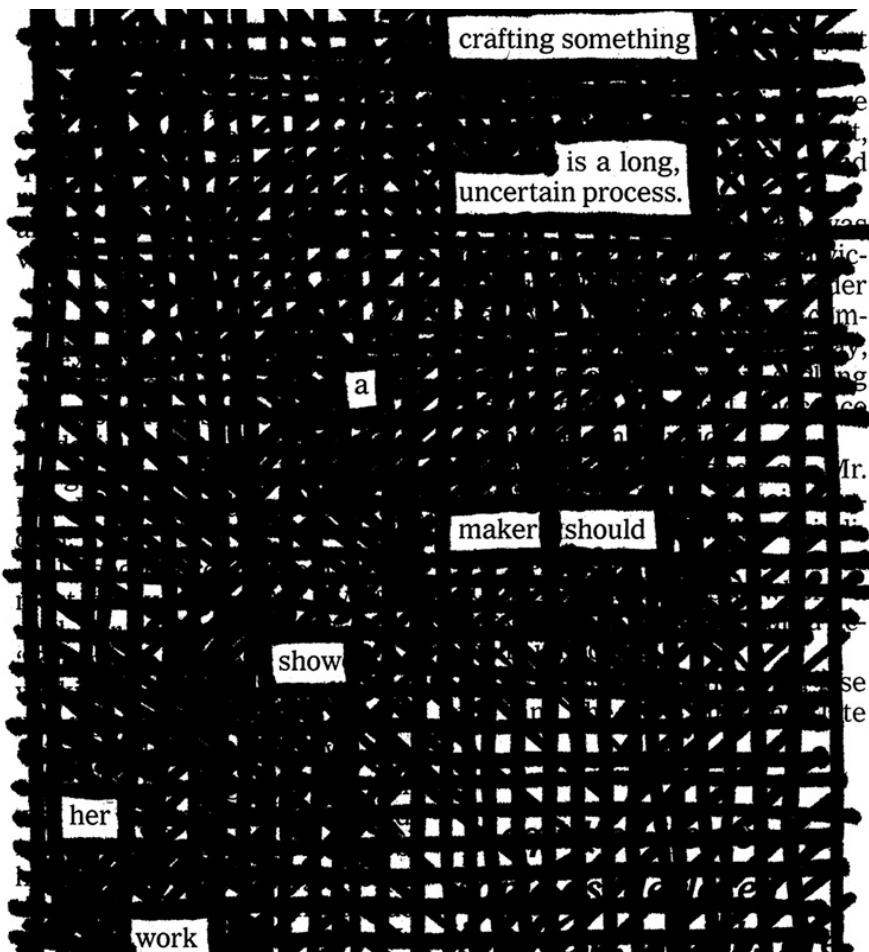
Almost all of the people I look up to and try to steal from today, regardless of their profession, have built *sharing* into their routine. These people aren’t schmoozing at cocktail parties; they’re too busy for that. They’re cranking away in their studios, their laboratories, or their cubicles, but instead of maintaining absolute secrecy and hoarding their work, they’re open about what they’re working on, and they’re consistently posting bits and pieces of their work, their ideas, and what they’re learning online. Instead of wasting their time “networking,” they’re taking advantage of the network. By generously sharing their ideas and their knowledge, they often gain an audience that they can then leverage when they need it—for fellowship, feedback, or patronage.

I wanted to create a kind of beginner's manual for this way of operating, so here's what I came up with: a book for people who hate the very idea of self-promotion. An *alternative*, if you will, to self-promotion. I'm going to try to teach you how to think about your work as a never-ending process, how to share your process in a way that attracts people who might be interested in what you do, and how to deal with the ups and downs of putting yourself and your work out in the world. If *Steal Like an Artist* was a book about stealing influence from other people, this book is about how to influence others by letting them steal from you.

Imagine if your next boss didn't have to read your résumé because he already reads your blog. Imagine being a student and getting your first gig based on a school project you posted online. Imagine losing your job but having a social network of people familiar with your work and ready to help you find a new one. Imagine turning a side project or a hobby into your profession because you had a following that could support you.

Or imagine something simpler and just as satisfying: spending the majority of your time, energy, and attention practicing a craft, learning a trade, or running a business, while also allowing for the possibility that your work might attract a group of people who share your interests.

All you have to do is *show your work*.



① YOU DON'T HAVE
TO BE A GENIUS.

FIND A SCENIUS.

“Give what you have. To someone, it may be better than you dare to think.”

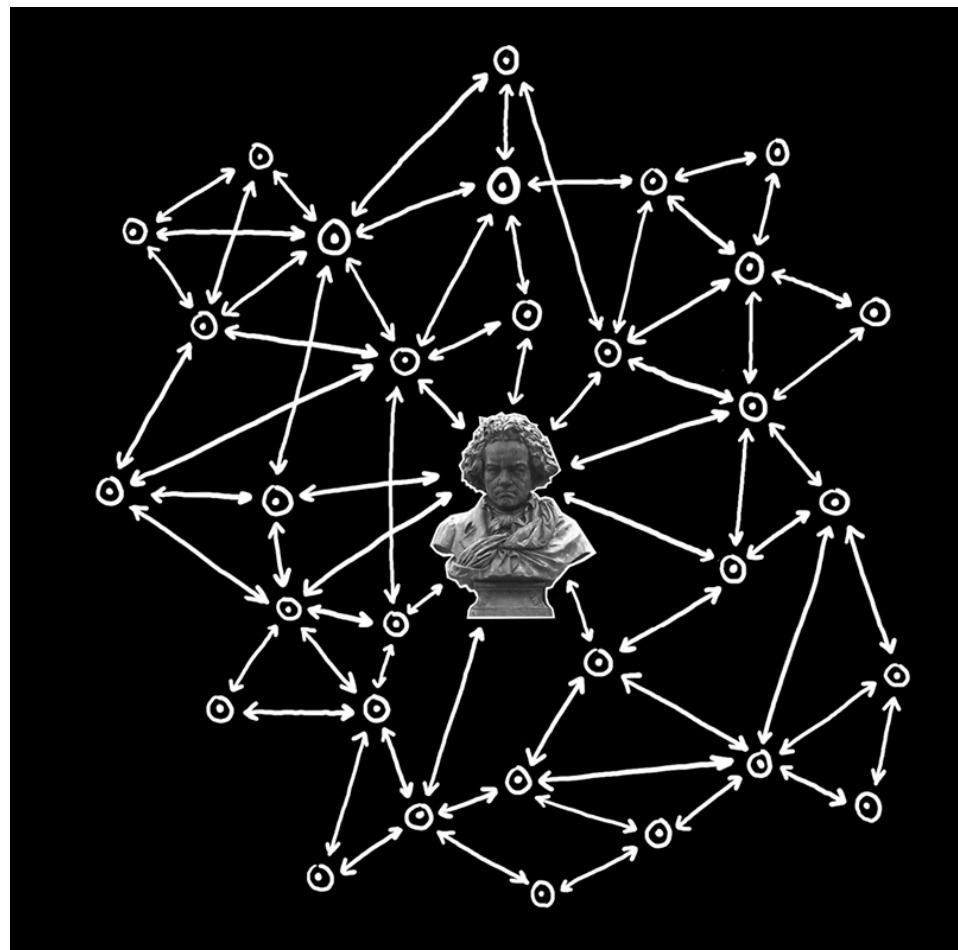
—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

There are a lot of destructive myths about creativity, but one of the most dangerous is the “lone genius” myth: An individual with superhuman talents appears out of nowhere at certain points in history, free of influences or precedent, with a direct connection to God or The Muse. When inspiration comes, it strikes like a lightning bolt, a lightbulb switches on in his head, and then he spends the rest of his time toiling away in his studio, shaping this idea into a finished masterpiece that he releases into the world to great fanfare. If you believe in the lone genius myth, creativity is an *antisocial* act, performed by only a few great figures—mostly dead men with names like Mozart, Einstein, or Picasso. The rest of us are left to stand around and gawk in awe at their achievements.

There’s a healthier way of thinking about creativity that the musician Brian Eno refers to as “scenius.” Under this model, great ideas are often birthed by a group of creative individuals—artists, curators, thinkers, theorists, and other tastemakers—who make up an “ecology of talent.” If you look back closely at history, many of the people who we think of as lone geniuses were actually part of “a whole scene of people who were supporting each other, looking at each other’s work, copying from each other, stealing ideas, and contributing ideas.” Scenius doesn’t take away from the achievements of those great individuals; it just acknowledges that good work isn’t created in a vacuum, and that creativity is always, in some sense, a collaboration, the result of a mind connected to other minds.



What I love about the idea of scenius is that it makes room in the story of creativity for the rest of us: the people who don't consider ourselves geniuses. Being a valuable part of a scenius is not necessarily about how smart or talented you are, but about what you have to contribute—the ideas you share, the quality of the connections you make, and the conversations you start. If we forget about genius and think more about how we can nurture and contribute to a scenius, we can adjust our own expectations and the expectations of the worlds we want to accept us. We can stop asking what others can do for us, and start asking what we can do for others.



We live in an age where it's easier than ever to join a scenius. The Internet is basically a bunch of sceniuses connected together, divorced from physical geography. Blogs, social media sites, email groups, discussion boards, forums—they're all the same thing: virtual scenes where people go to hang out and talk about the things they care about. There's no bouncer, no gatekeeper, and no barrier to entering these scenes: You don't have to be rich, you don't have to be famous, and you don't have to have a fancy résumé or a degree from an expensive school. Online, everyone—the artist and the curator, the master and the apprentice, the expert and the amateur—has the ability to contribute something.

BE AN
AMATEUR.

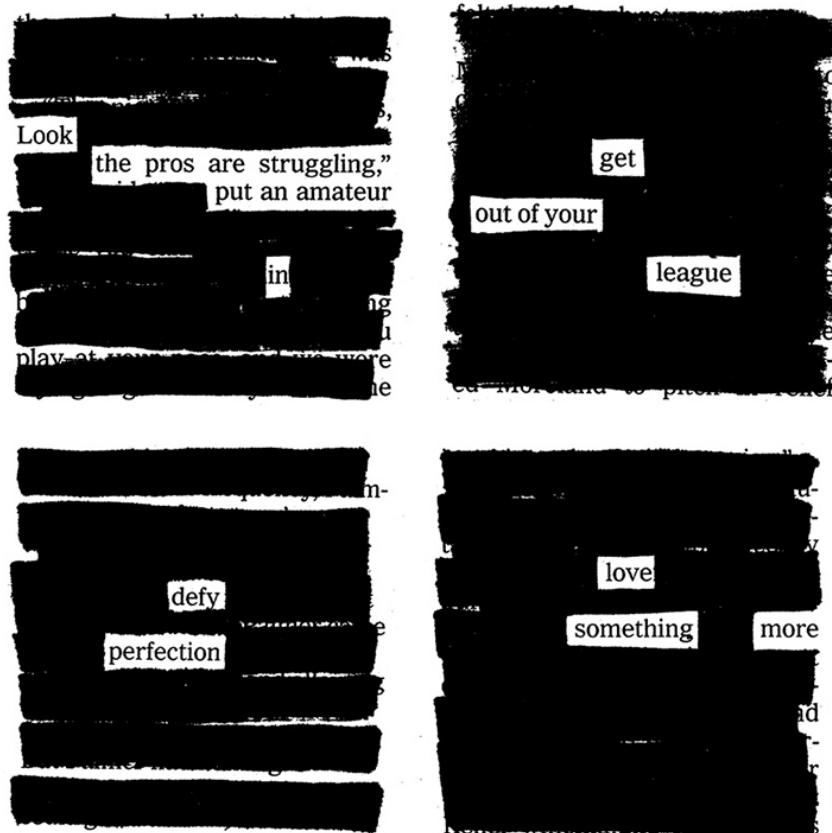
“That’s all any of us are: amateurs. We don’t live long enough to be anything else.”

—Charlie Chaplin

We’re all terrified of being revealed as amateurs, but in fact, today it is the *amateur*—the enthusiast who pursues her work in the spirit of love (in French, the word means “lover”), regardless of the potential for fame, money, or career—who often has the advantage over the professional. Because they have little to lose, amateurs are willing to try anything and share the results. They take chances, experiment, and follow their whims. Sometimes, in the process of doing things in an unprofessional way, they make new discoveries. “In the beginner’s mind, there are many possibilities,” said Zen monk Shunryu Suzuki. “In the expert’s mind, there are few.”

Amateurs are not afraid to make mistakes or look ridiculous in public. They’re in love, so they don’t hesitate to do work that others think of as silly or just plain stupid. “The stupidest possible creative act is still a creative act,” writes Clay Shirky in his book *Cognitive Surplus*. “On the spectrum of creative work, the difference between the mediocre and the good is vast. Mediocrity is, however, still on the spectrum; you can move from mediocre to good in increments. The real gap is between doing nothing and doing something.” Amateurs know that contributing something is better than contributing nothing.

Amateurs might lack formal training, but they’re all lifelong learners, and they make a point of learning in the open, so that others can learn from their failures and successes. Writer David Foster Wallace said that he thought good nonfiction was a chance to “watch somebody reasonably bright but also reasonably average pay far closer attention and think at far more length about all sorts of different stuff than most of us have a chance to in our daily lives.” Amateurs fit the same bill: They’re just regular people who get obsessed by something and spend a ton of time thinking out loud about it.



Sometimes, amateurs have more to teach us than experts. “It often happens that two schoolboys can solve difficulties in their work for one another better than the master can,” wrote author C. S. Lewis. “The fellow-pupil can help more than the master because he knows less. The difficulty we want him to explain is one he has recently met. The expert met it so long ago he has forgotten.” Watching amateurs at work can also inspire us to attempt the work ourselves. “I saw the Sex Pistols,” said New Order frontman Bernard Sumner. “They were terrible. . . . I wanted to get up and be terrible with them.” Raw enthusiasm is contagious.

The world is changing at such a rapid rate that it’s turning us *all* into amateurs. Even for professionals, the best way to flourish is to retain an amateur’s spirit and embrace uncertainty and the unknown. When Radiohead frontman Thom Yorke was asked what he thought his greatest strength was, he answered, “That I don’t know what I’m doing.” Like one of his heroes, Tom Waits, whenever Yorke feels like his songwriting is getting too comfortable or stale, he’ll pick up an instrument he doesn’t know how to play and try to write with it. This is yet another trait of amateurs—they’ll use whatever tools they can get their hands on to try to get their ideas into the world. “I’m an artist, man,” said John Lennon. “Give me a tuba, and I’ll get you something out of it.”

The best way to get started on the path to sharing your work is to think about what you want to learn,

and make a commitment to learning it in front of others. Find a scenius, pay attention to what others are sharing, and then start taking note of what they're *not* sharing. Be on the lookout for voids that you can fill with your own efforts, no matter how bad they are at first. Don't worry, for now, about how you'll make money or a career off it. Forget about being an expert or a professional, and wear your amateurism (your heart, your love) on your sleeve. Share what you love, and the people who love the same things will find you.

YOU CAN'T FIND YOUR VOICE IF YOU DON'T USE IT.

“Find your voice, shout it from the rooftops, and keep doing it until the people that are looking for you find you.”

— Dan Harmon

We're always being told *find your voice*. When I was younger, I never really knew what this meant. I used to worry a lot about voice, wondering if I had my own. But now I realize that the only way to find your voice is to use it. It's hardwired, built into you. Talk about the things you love. Your voice will follow.

When the late film critic Roger Ebert went through several intense surgeries to treat his cancer, he lost the ability to speak. He lost his voice—physically and permanently. Here was a man who made a great deal of his living by speaking on television and now he couldn't say a word. In order to communicate with his friends and family, he'd have to either scribble responses on a pad of paper, or type on his Mac and have the awkward computer voice read it out loud through his laptop speakers.

Cut off from everyday conversation, he poured himself into tweeting, posting to Facebook, and blogging at rogerebert.com. He ripped out posts at a breakneck speed, writing thousands and thousands of words

about everything he could think of—his boyhood in Urbana, Illinois, his love for Steak 'n Shake, his conversations with famous movie actors, his thoughts on his inevitable death. Hundreds and hundreds of people would respond to his posts, and he would respond back. Blogging became his primary way of communicating with the world. “On the web, my real voice finds expression,” he wrote.



Ebert knew his time on this planet was short, and he wanted to share everything he could in the time he had left. “Mr. Ebert writes as if it were a matter of life and death,” wrote journalist Janet Maslin, “because it is.” Ebert was blogging because he had to blog—because it was a matter of being heard, or not being heard. A matter of existing or not existing.

It sounds a little extreme, but in this day and age, if your work isn’t online, it doesn’t exist. We all have the opportunity to use our voices, to have our say, but so many of us are wasting it. If you want people to know about what you do and the things you care about, you have to share.

READ OBITUARIES.

“Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything—all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked.”

—Steve Jobs

If all this sounds scary or like a lot of work, consider this: One day you’ll be dead. Most of us prefer to ignore this most basic fact of life, but thinking about our inevitable end has a way of putting everything into perspective.

We’ve all read stories of near-death experiences changing people’s lives. When George Lucas was a teenager, he almost died in a car accident. He decided “every day now is an extra day,” dedicated himself to film, and went on to direct *Star Wars*. Wayne Coyne, lead singer of The Flaming Lips, was 16 when he was held up while working at a Long John Silver’s. “I realized I was going to die,” he says. “And when that gets into your mind . . . it utterly changed me . . . I thought, *I’m not going to sit here and wait for things to happen, I’m going to make them happen, and if people think I’m an idiot I don’t care.*”

Tim Kreider, in his book *We Learn Nothing*, says that getting stabbed in the throat was the best thing to ever happen to him. For a whole year, he was happy and life was good. “You’d like to think that nearly getting killed would be a permanently life-altering experience,” Kreider writes, but “the illumination didn’t last.” Eventually, he was back to “the busy work of living.” The writer George Saunders, speaking of his own near-death experience, said, “For three or four days after that, it was the most beautiful world.

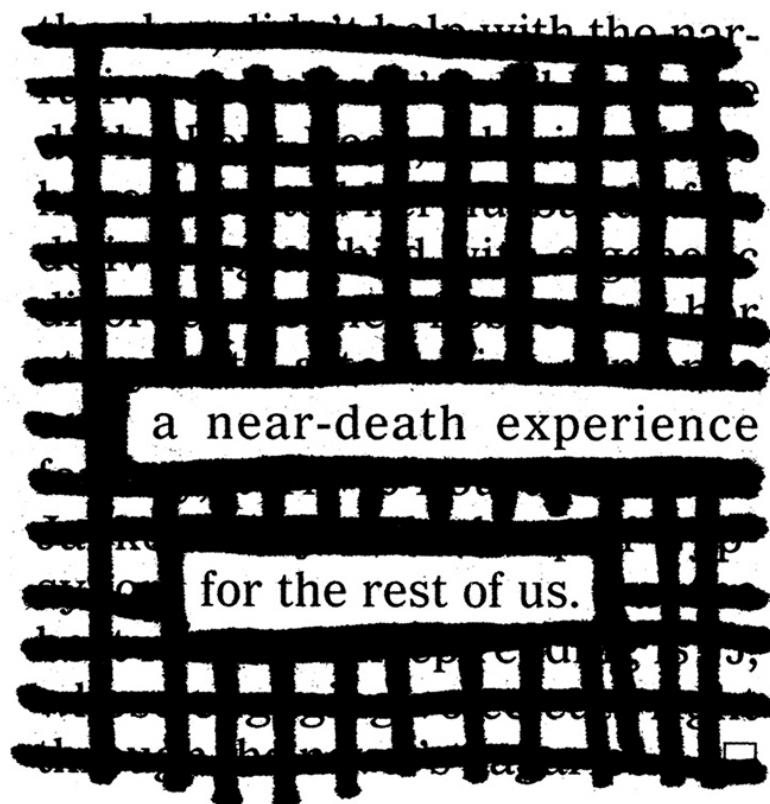
To have gotten back in it, you know? And I thought, *if you could walk around like that all the time, to really have that awareness that it's actually going to end. That's the trick.*"

Unfortunately, I am a coward. As much as I would like the existential euphoria that comes with it, I don't really *want* a near-death experience. I want to stay safe and stay away from death as much as I can. I certainly don't want to taunt it or court it or invite it any closer than it needs to be. But I do somehow want to remember that it's coming for me.

It's for this reason that I read the obituaries every morning. Obituaries are like near-death experiences for cowards. Reading them is a way for me to think about death while also keeping it at arm's length.

Obituaries aren't really about death; they're about life. "The sum of every obituary is how heroic people are, and how noble," writes artist Maira Kalman. Reading about people who are dead now and did things with their lives makes me want to get up and do something decent with mine. Thinking about death every morning makes me want to live.

Try it: Start reading the obituaries every morning. Take inspiration from the people who muddled through life before you—they all started out as amateurs, and they got where they were going by making do with what they were given, and having the guts to put themselves out there. Follow their example.



② THINK PROCESS, NOT PRODUCT.

TAKE PEOPLE BEHIND THE SCENES.

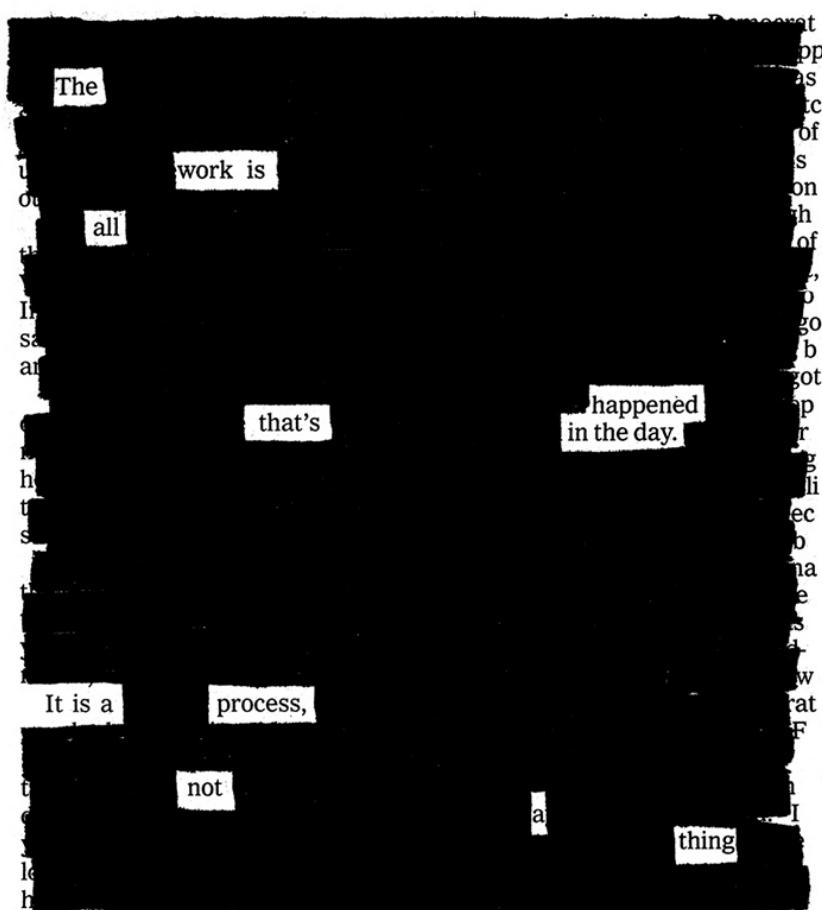
“A lot of people are so used to just seeing the outcome of work. They never see the side of the work you go through to produce the outcome.”

—Michael Jackson

When a painter talks about her “work,” she could be talking about two different things: There’s the *artwork*, the finished piece, framed and hung on a gallery wall, and there’s the *art work*, all the day-to-day stuff that goes on behind the scenes in her studio: looking for inspiration, getting an idea, applying oil to a canvas, etc. There’s “painting,” the noun, and there’s “painting,” the verb. As in all kinds of work, there is a distinction between the painter’s *process*, and the *products* of her process.

Traditionally, the artist has been trained to regard her creative process as something that should be kept to herself. This way of thinking is articulated by David Bayles and Ted Orland in their book, *Art and Fear*: “To all viewers but yourself, what matters is the product: the finished artwork. To you, and you alone, what matters is the process: the experience of shaping the artwork.” An artist is supposed to toil in

secrecy, keeping her ideas and her work under lock and key, waiting until she has a magnificent product to show for herself before she tries to connect with an audience. “The private details of artmaking are utterly uninteresting to audiences,” write Bayles and Orland, “because they’re almost never visible—or even knowable—from examining the finished work.”



This all made sense in a pre-digital age, when the only way an artist could connect with an audience was through a gallery show or write-up in some fancy art magazine. But today, by taking advantage of the Internet and social media, an artist can share whatever she wants, whenever she wants, at almost no cost. She can decide exactly how much or how little of her work and herself she will share, and she can be as open about her process as she wants to—she can share her sketches and works-in-progress, post pictures of her studio, or blog about her influences, inspiration, and tools. By sharing her day-to-day process—the thing she really cares about—she can form a unique bond with her audience.

To many artists, particularly those who grew up in the pre-digital era, this kind of openness and the potential vulnerability that goes along with sharing one’s process is a terrifying idea. Here’s the author Edgar Allan Poe, writing in 1846: “Most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes.”



But human beings are interested in other human beings and what other human beings do. “People really do want to see how the sausage gets made.” That’s how designers Dan Provost and Tom Gerhardt put it in their book on entrepreneurship, *It Will Be Exhilarating*. “By putting things out there, consistently, you can form a relationship with your customers. It allows them to see the person behind the products.” Audiences not only want to stumble across great work, but they, too, long to be creative and part of the creative process. By letting go of our egos and sharing our process, we allow for the possibility of people having an ongoing connection with us and our work, which helps us move more of our product.

BECOME A DOCUMENTARIAN OF WHAT YOU DO.

“In order for connection to happen, we have to allow ourselves to be seen—really seen.”

—Brené Brown

In 2013, the Internet fell in love with astronaut Chris Hadfield, commander of the International Space Station. Three years earlier, Hadfield and his family were sitting around the dinner table, trying to figure out ways to generate interest for the Canadian Space Agency, which, like many space programs, faced major budget cuts and needed more public support. “Dad wanted a way to help people connect with the real side of what an astronaut’s life is,” said Hadfield’s son Evan. “Not just the glamour and science, but also the day-to-day activities.”

Commander Hadfield wanted to show his work.

Things fell into place when his sons explained social media to him and got him set up on Twitter and other social networks. During his next five-month mission, while performing all his regular astronautical duties, he tweeted, answered questions from his followers, posted pictures he’d taken of Earth, recorded music, and filmed YouTube videos of himself clipping his nails, brushing his teeth, sleeping, and even performing maintenance on the space station. Millions of people ate it all up, including my agent, Ted, who tweeted, “Wouldn’t normally watch live video of a couple of guys doing plumbing repair, but IT’S IN SPACE!”

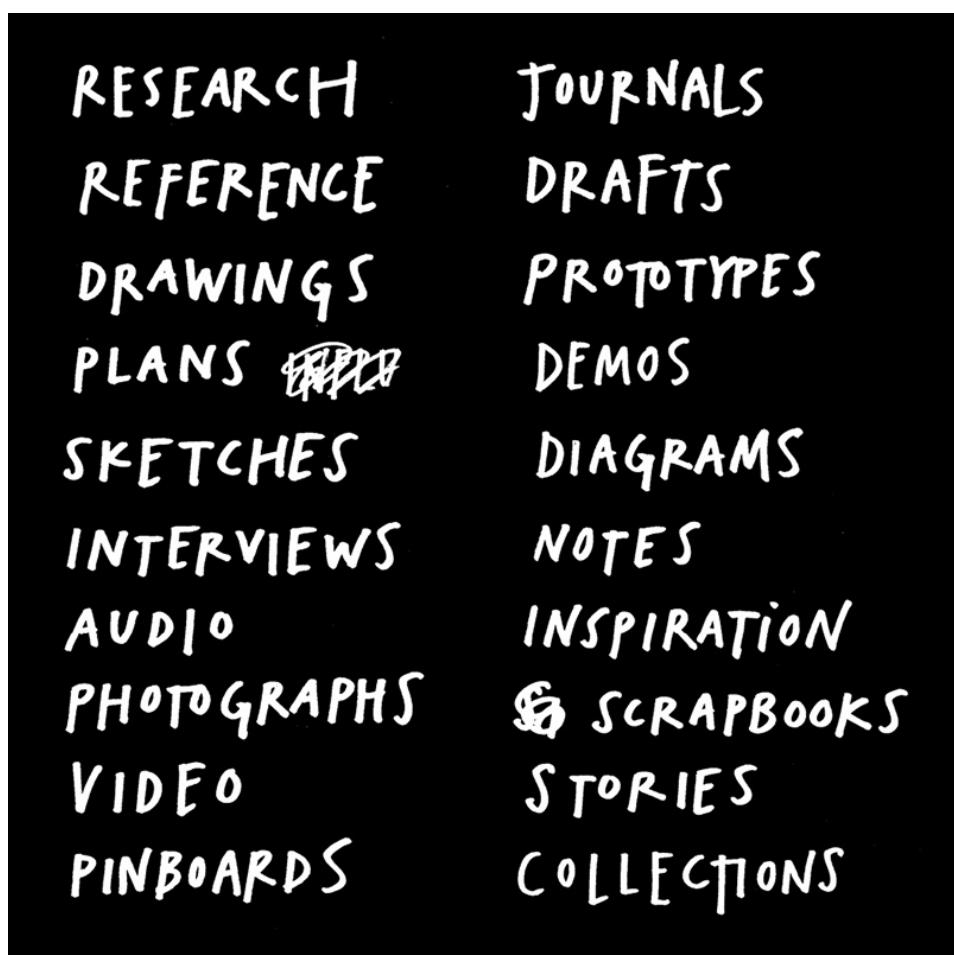
Now, let’s face it: We’re not all artists or astronauts. A lot of us go about our work and feel like we have nothing to show for it at the end of the day. But whatever the nature of your work, there is an art to what you do, and there are people who would be interested in that art, if only you presented it to them in the right way. In fact, sharing your process might actually be most valuable if the products of your work

aren't easily shared, if you're still in the apprentice stage of your work, if you can't just slap up a portfolio and call it a day, or if your process doesn't necessarily lead to tangible finished products.

How can you show your work even when you have nothing to show? The first step is to scoop up the scraps and the residue of your process and shape them into some interesting bit of media that you can share. You have to turn the invisible into something other people can see. "You have to make stuff," said journalist David Carr when he was asked if he had any advice for students. "No one is going to give a damn about your résumé; they want to see what you have made with your own little fingers."

Become a documentarian of what you do. Start a work journal: Write your thoughts down in a notebook, or speak them into an audio recorder. Keep a scrapbook. Take a lot of photographs of your work at different stages in your process. Shoot video of you working. This isn't about making art, it's about simply keeping track of what's going on around you. Take advantage of all the cheap, easy tools at your disposal—these days, most of us carry a fully functional multimedia studio around in our smartphones.

Whether you share it or not, documenting and recording your process as you go along has its own rewards: You'll start to see the work you're doing more clearly and feel like you're making progress. And when you're ready to share, you'll have a surplus of material to choose from.



③ SHARE SOMETHING SMALL EVERY DAY.

SEND OUT A
DAILY DISPATCH.

“Put yourself, and your work, out there every day, and you’ll start meeting some amazing people.”

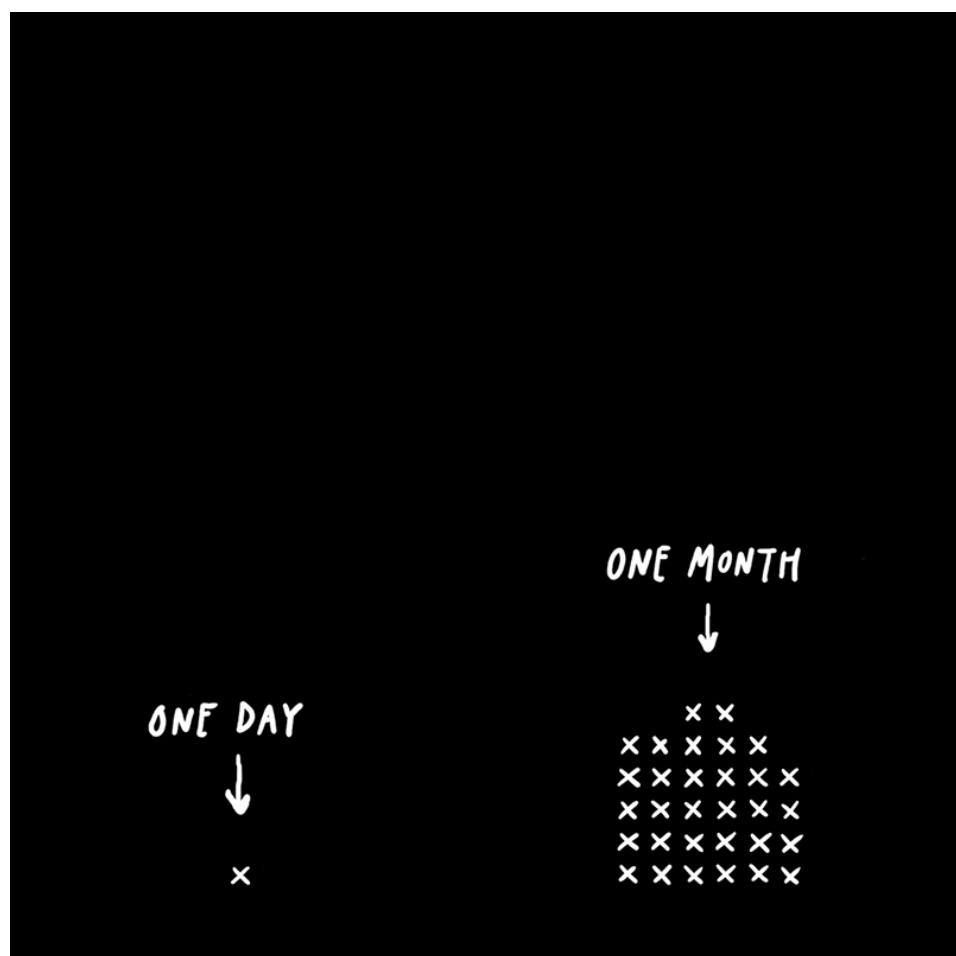
—Bobby Solomon

Overnight success is a myth. Dig into almost every overnight success story and you’ll find about a decade’s worth of hard work and perseverance. Building a substantial body of work takes a long time—a lifetime, really—but thankfully, you don’t need that time all in one big chunk. So forget about decades, forget about years, and forget about months. Focus on days.

The day is the only unit of time that I can really get my head around. Seasons change, weeks are completely human-made, but the day has a rhythm. The sun goes up; the sun goes down. I can handle that.

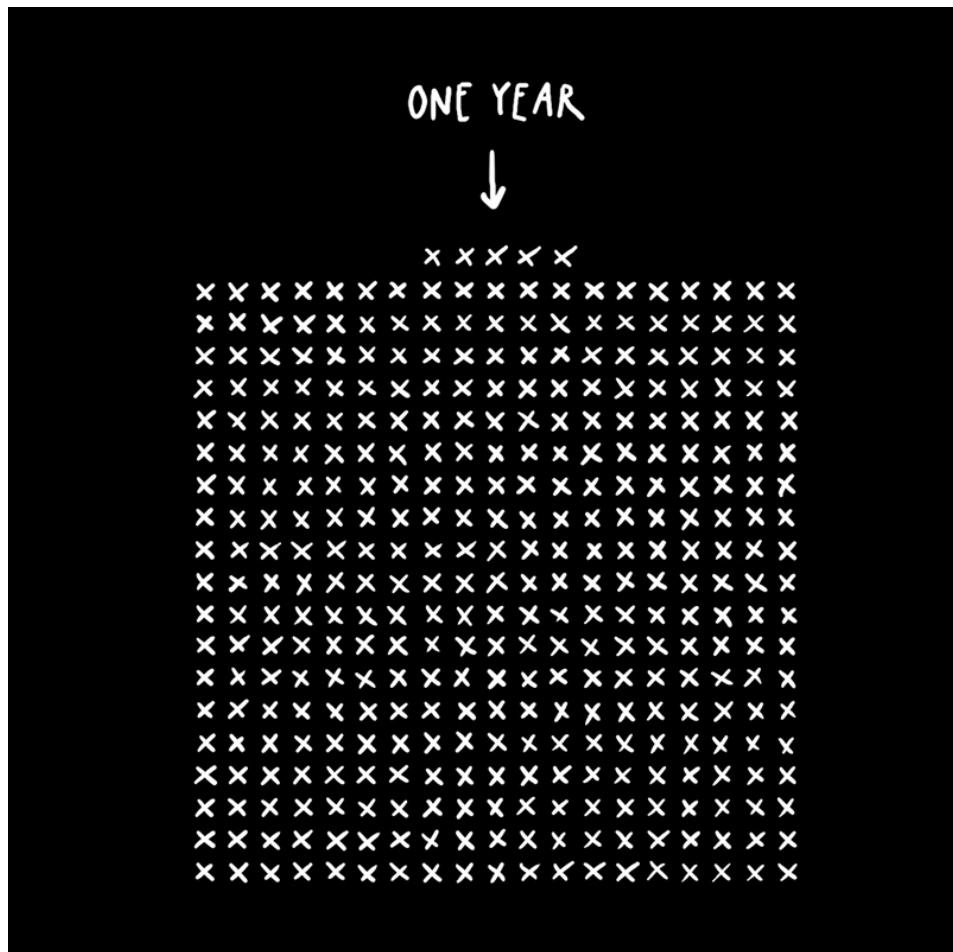
Once a day, after you’ve done your day’s work, go back to your documentation and find one little piece

of your process that you can share. Where you are in your process will determine what that piece is. If you're in the very early stages, share your influences and what's inspiring you. If you're in the middle of executing a project, write about your methods or share works in progress. If you've just completed a project, show the final product, share scraps from the cutting-room floor, or write about what you learned. If you have lots of projects out into the world, you can report on how they're doing—you can tell stories about how people are interacting with your work.



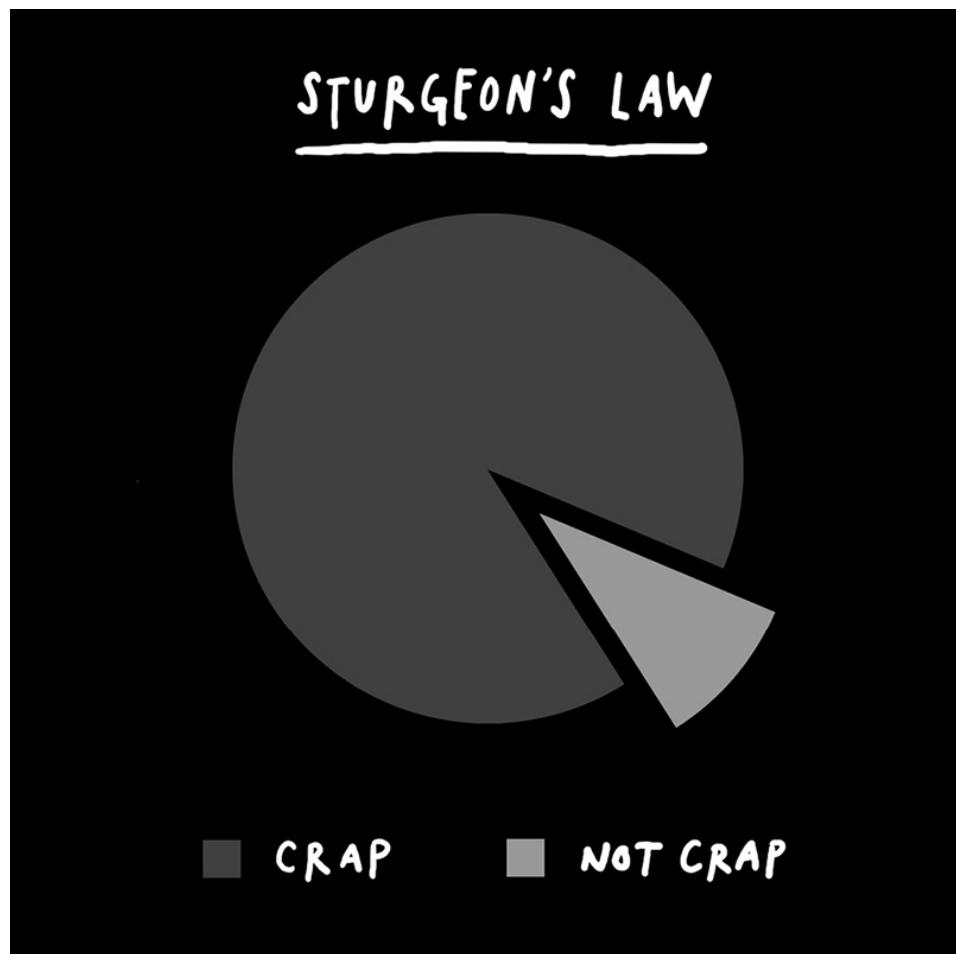
A daily dispatch is even better than a résumé or a portfolio, because it shows what we're working on *right now*. When the artist Ze Frank was interviewing job candidates, he complained, “When I ask them to show me work, they show me things from school, or from another job, but I’m more interested in what they did last weekend.” A good daily dispatch is like getting all the DVD extras before a movie comes out—you get to watch deleted scenes and listen to director’s commentary *while* the movie is being made.

The form of what you share doesn’t matter. Your daily dispatch can be anything you want—a blog post, an email, a tweet, a YouTube video, or some other little bit of media. There’s no one-size-fits-all plan for everybody.



Social media sites are the perfect place to share daily updates. Don't worry about being on every platform; pick and choose based on what you do and the people you're trying to reach. Filmmakers hang out on YouTube or Vimeo. Businesspeople, for some strange reason, love LinkedIn. Writers love Twitter. Visual artists tend to like Tumblr, Instagram, or Facebook. The landscape is constantly changing, and new platforms are always popping up . . . and disappearing.

Don't be afraid to be an early adopter—jump on a new platform and see if there's something interesting you can do with it. If you can't find a good use for a platform, feel free to abandon it. Use your creativity. Film critic Tommy Edison, who's been blind since birth, takes photos of his day-to-day life and posts them to Instagram under [@blindfilmcritic](#). He's followed by more than 30,000 people!



A lot of social media is just about typing into boxes. What you type into the box often depends on the prompt. Facebook asks you to indulge yourself, with questions like “How are you feeling?” or “What’s on your mind?” Twitter’s is hardly better: “What’s happening?” I like the tagline at dribbble.com: “What are you working on?” Stick to that question and you’ll be good. Don’t show your lunch or your latte; show your work.

Don’t worry about everything you post being perfect. Science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon once said that 90 percent of everything is crap. The same is true of our own work. The trouble is, we don’t always know what’s good and what sucks. That’s why it’s important to get things in front of others and see how they react. “Sometimes you don’t always know what you’ve got,” says artist Wayne White. “It really does need a little social chemistry to make it show itself to you sometimes.”

Don’t say you don’t have enough time. We’re all busy, but we all get 24 hours a day. People often ask me, “How do you find the time for all this?” And I answer, “I look for it.” You find time the same place you find spare change: in the nooks and crannies. You find it in the cracks between the big stuff—your commute, your lunch break, the few hours after your kids go to bed. You might have to miss an episode of your favorite TV show, you might have to miss an hour of sleep, but you can find the time if you look for it. I like to work while the world is sleeping, and share while the world is at work.

Of course, don't let sharing your work take precedence over actually doing your work. If you're having a hard time balancing the two, just set a timer for 30 minutes. Once the timer goes off, kick yourself off the Internet and get back to work.

“One day at a time. It sounds so simple. It actually is simple but it isn’t easy: It requires incredible support and fastidious structuring.”

—*Russell Brand*

THE “SO WHAT?” TEST

“Make no mistake: This is not your diary. You are not letting it all hang out. You are picking and choosing every single word.”

—*Dani Shapiro*

Always remember that anything you post to the Internet has now become public. “The Internet is a copy machine,” writes author Kevin Kelly. “Once anything that can be copied is brought into contact with the Internet, it will be copied, and those copies never leave.” Ideally, you *want* the work you post online to be copied and spread to every corner of the Internet, so don’t post things online that you’re not ready for everyone in the world to see. As publicist Lauren Cerand says, “Post as though everyone who can read it

has the power to fire you.”

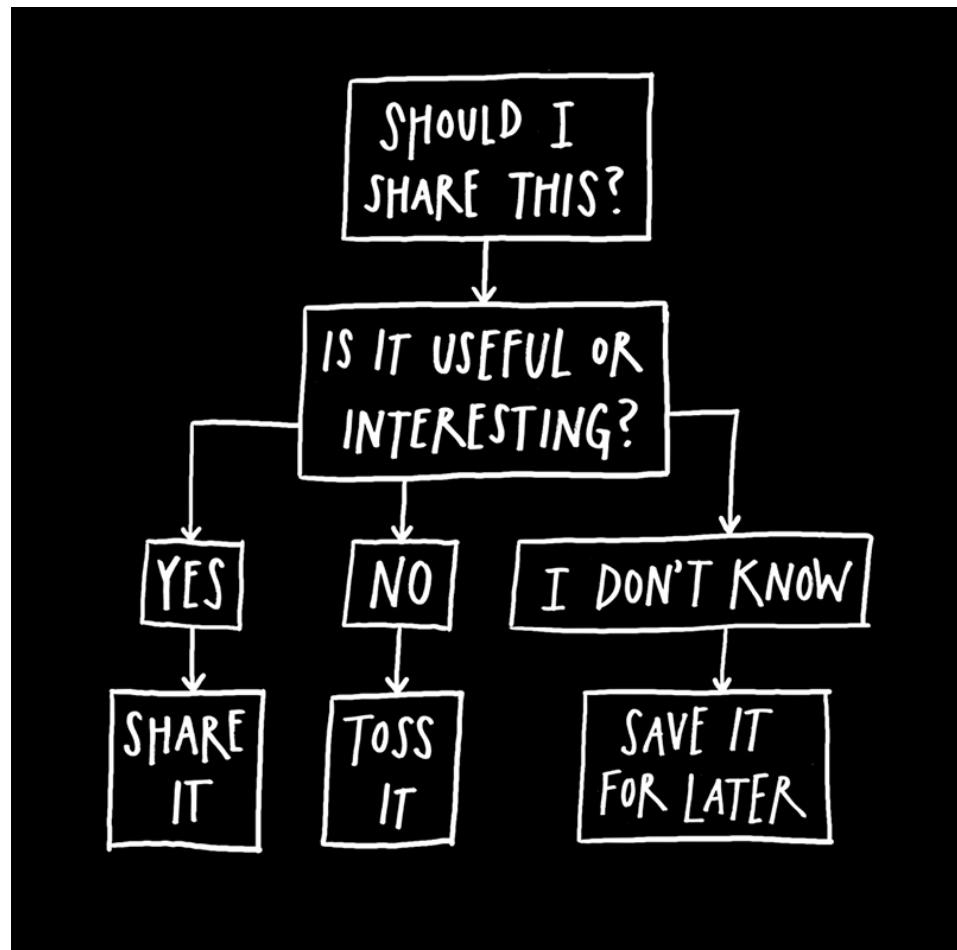
Be open, share imperfect and unfinished work that you want feedback on, but don’t share absolutely everything. There’s a big, big difference between sharing and over-sharing.

The act of sharing is one of generosity—you’re putting something out there because you think it might be helpful or entertaining to someone on the other side of the screen.

I had a professor in college who returned our graded essays, walked up to the chalkboard, and wrote in huge letters: “SO WHAT?” She threw the piece of chalk down and said, “Ask yourself that every time you turn in a piece of writing.” It’s a lesson I never forgot.



Always be sure to run everything you share with others through The “So What?” Test. Don’t overthink it; just go with your gut. If you’re unsure about whether to share something, let it sit for 24 hours. Put it in a drawer and walk out the door. The next day, take it out and look at it with fresh eyes. Ask yourself, “Is this helpful? Is it entertaining? Is it something I’d be comfortable with my boss or my mother seeing?” There’s nothing wrong with saving things for later. The save as draft button is like a prophylactic—it might not feel as good in the moment, but you’ll be glad you used it in the morning.



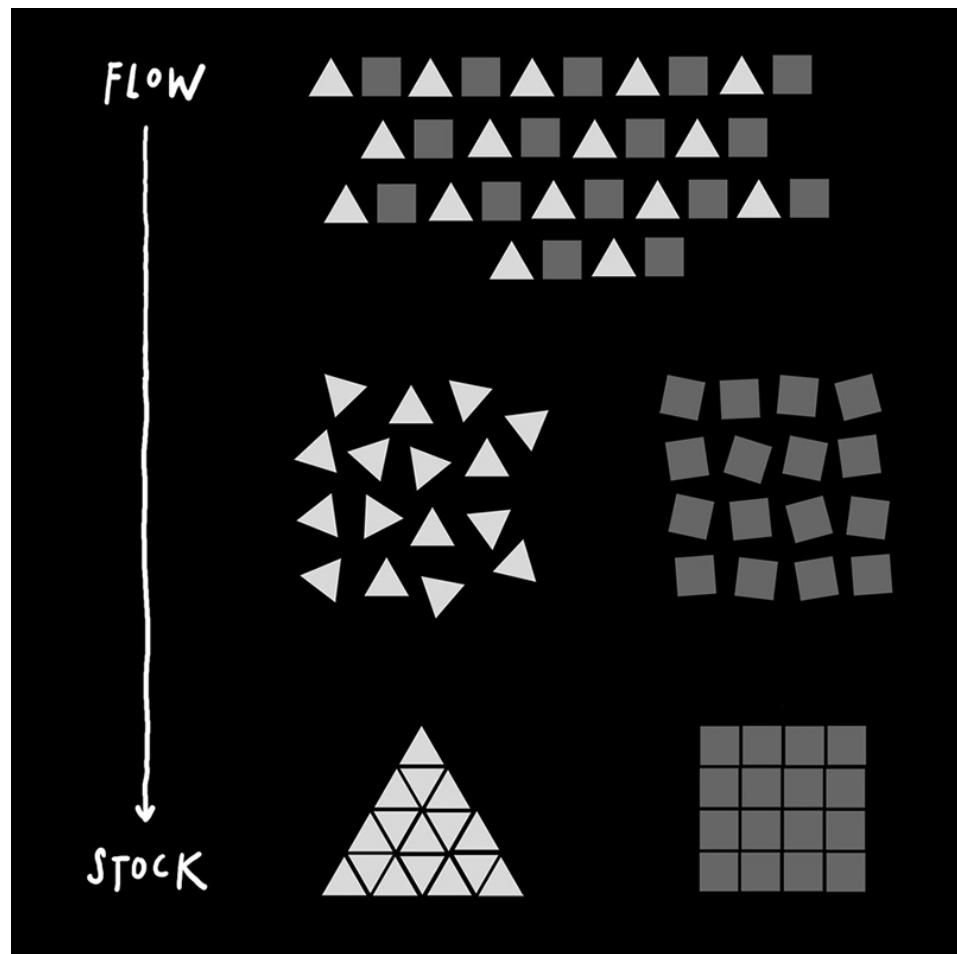
TURN YOUR FLOW INTO STOCK.

"If you work on something a little bit every day, you end up with something that is massive."

—Kenneth Goldsmith

"Stock and flow" is an economic concept that writer Robin Sloan has adapted into a metaphor for media: "Flow is the feed. It's the posts and the tweets. It's the stream of daily and sub-daily updates that remind people you exist. Stock is the durable stuff. It's the content you produce that's as interesting in two months (or two years) as it is today. It's what people discover via search. It's what spreads slowly but surely, building fans over time." Sloan says the magic formula is to maintain your flow while working

on your stock in the background.



In my experience, your stock is best made by collecting, organizing, and expanding upon your flow. Social media sites function a lot like public notebooks—they’re places where we think out loud, let other people think back at us, then hopefully think some more. But the thing about keeping notebooks is that you have to revisit them in order to make the most out of them. You have to flip back through old ideas to see what you’ve been thinking. Once you make sharing part of your daily routine, you’ll notice themes and trends emerging in what you share. You’ll find patterns in your flow.

When you detect these patterns, you can start gathering these bits and pieces and turn them into something bigger and more substantial. You can turn your flow into stock. For example, a lot of the ideas in this book started out as tweets, which then became blog posts, which then became book chapters. Small things, over time, can get big.

BUILD A GOOD (DOMAIN) NAME.

“Carving out a space for yourself online, somewhere where you can express yourself and share your work, is still one of the best possible investments you can make with your time.”

—Andy Baio

Social networks are great, but they come and go. (Remember Myspace? Friendster? GeoCities?) If you’re really interested in sharing your work and expressing yourself, nothing beats owning your own space online, a place that you control, a place that no one can take away from you, a world headquarters where people can always find you.

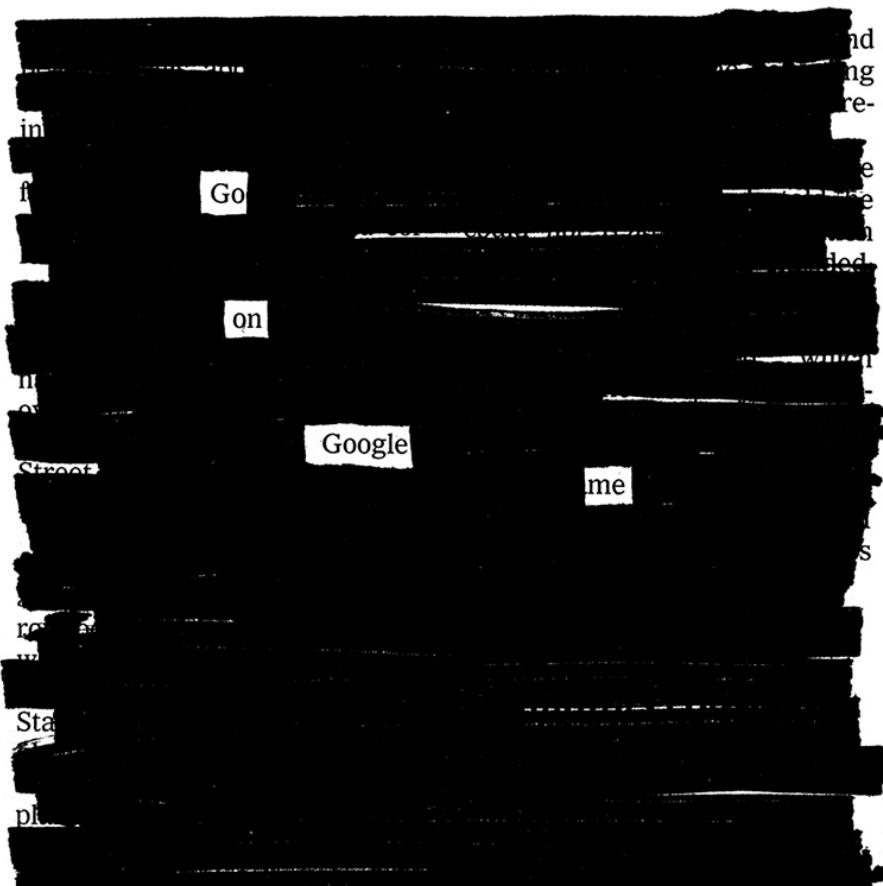
More than 10 years ago, I staked my own little Internet claim and bought the domain name austinkleon.com. I was a complete amateur with no skills when I began building my website: It started off bare bones and ugly. Eventually, I figured out how to install a blog, and that changed everything. A blog is the ideal machine for turning flow into stock: One little blog post is nothing on its own, but publish a thousand blog posts over a decade, and it turns into your life’s work. My blog has been my sketchbook, my studio, my gallery, my storefront, and my salon. Absolutely everything good that has happened in my career can be traced back to my blog. My books, my art shows, my speaking gigs, some of my best friendships—they all exist because I have my own little piece of turf on the Internet.

So, if you get one thing out of this book make it this: Go register a domain name. Buy [www.\[insert your name here\].com](http://www.[insert your name here].com). If your name is common, or you don’t like your name, come up with a pseudonym or an alias, and register that. Then buy some web hosting and build a website. (These things sound technical, but they’re really not—a few Google searches and some books from the library will show you the way.) If you don’t have the time or inclination to build your own site, there’s a small army of web designers ready to help you. Your website doesn’t have to look pretty; it just has to exist.

Don't think of your website as a self-promotion machine, think of it as a self-invention machine. Online, you can become the person you really want to be. Fill your website with your work and your ideas and the stuff you care about. Over the years, you will be tempted to abandon it for the newest, shiniest social network. Don't give in. Don't let it fall into neglect. Think about it in the long term. Stick with it, maintain it, and let it change with you over time.

When she was young and starting out, Patti Smith got this advice from William Burroughs: "Build a good name. Keep your name clean. Don't make compromises. Don't worry about making a bunch of money or being successful. Be concerned with doing good work . . . and if you can build a good name, eventually that name will be its own currency."

The beauty of owning your own turf is that you can do whatever you want with it. Your domain name is your domain. You don't have to make compromises. Build a good domain name, keep it clean, and eventually it will be its own currency. Whether people show up or they don't, you're out there, doing your thing, ready whenever they are.



④ OPEN UP YOUR CABINET OF CURIOSITIES.

DON'T BE A
HOARDER.

"The problem with hoarding is you end up living off your reserves. Eventually, you'll become stale. If you give away everything you have, you are left with nothing. This forces you to look, to be aware, to replenish. . . . Somehow the more you give away, the more comes back to you."

—Paul Arden

If you happened to be wealthy and educated and alive in 16th- and 17th-century Europe, it was fashionable to have a *Wunderkammern*, a “wonder chamber,” or a “cabinet of curiosities” in your house—a room filled with rare and remarkable objects that served as a kind of external display of your thirst for knowledge of the world. Inside a cabinet of curiosities you might find books, skeletons, jewels,

shells, art, plants, minerals, taxidermy specimens, stones, or any other exotic artifact. These collections often juxtaposed both natural and human-made marvels, revealing a kind of mash-up of handiwork by both God and human beings. They were the precursors to what we think of today as the modern museum—a place dedicated to the study of history, nature, and the arts.

We all have our own treasured collections. They can be physical cabinets of curiosities, say, living room bookshelves full of our favorite novels, records, and movies, or they can be more like intangible museums of the heart, our skulls lined with memories of places we've been, people we've met, experiences we've accumulated. We all carry around the weird and wonderful things we've come across while doing our work and living our lives. These mental scrapbooks form our tastes, and our tastes influence our work.



There's not as big of a difference between collecting and creating as you might think. A lot of the writers I know see the act of reading and the act of writing as existing on opposite ends of the same spectrum: The reading feeds the writing, which feeds the reading. "I'm basically a curator," says the writer and former bookseller Jonathan Lethem. "Making books has always felt very connected to my bookselling experience, that of wanting to draw people's attention to things that I liked, to shape things that I liked into new shapes."

Our tastes make us what we are, but they can also cast a shadow over our own work. “All of us who do creative work, we get into it because we have good taste,” says public radio personality Ira Glass. “But there is this gap. For the first couple years you make stuff, it’s just not that good. It’s trying to be good, it has potential, but it’s not. But your taste, the thing that got you into the game, is still killer.” Before we’re ready to take the leap of sharing our own work with the world, we can share our tastes in the work of others.

Where do you get your inspiration? What sorts of things do you fill your head with? What do you read? Do you subscribe to anything? What sites do you visit on the Internet? What music do you listen to? What movies do you see? Do you look at art? What do you collect? What’s inside your scrapbook? What do you pin to the corkboard above your desk? What do you stick on your refrigerator? Who’s done work that you admire? Who do you steal ideas from? Do you have any heroes? Who do you follow online? Who are the practitioners you look up to in your field?

Your influences are all worth sharing because they clue people in to who you are and what you do—sometimes even more than your own work.

“You’re only as good as your record collection.”

—DJ Spooky

NO GUILTY PLEASURES.

“I don’t believe in guilty pleasures. If you f---ing like something, like it.”

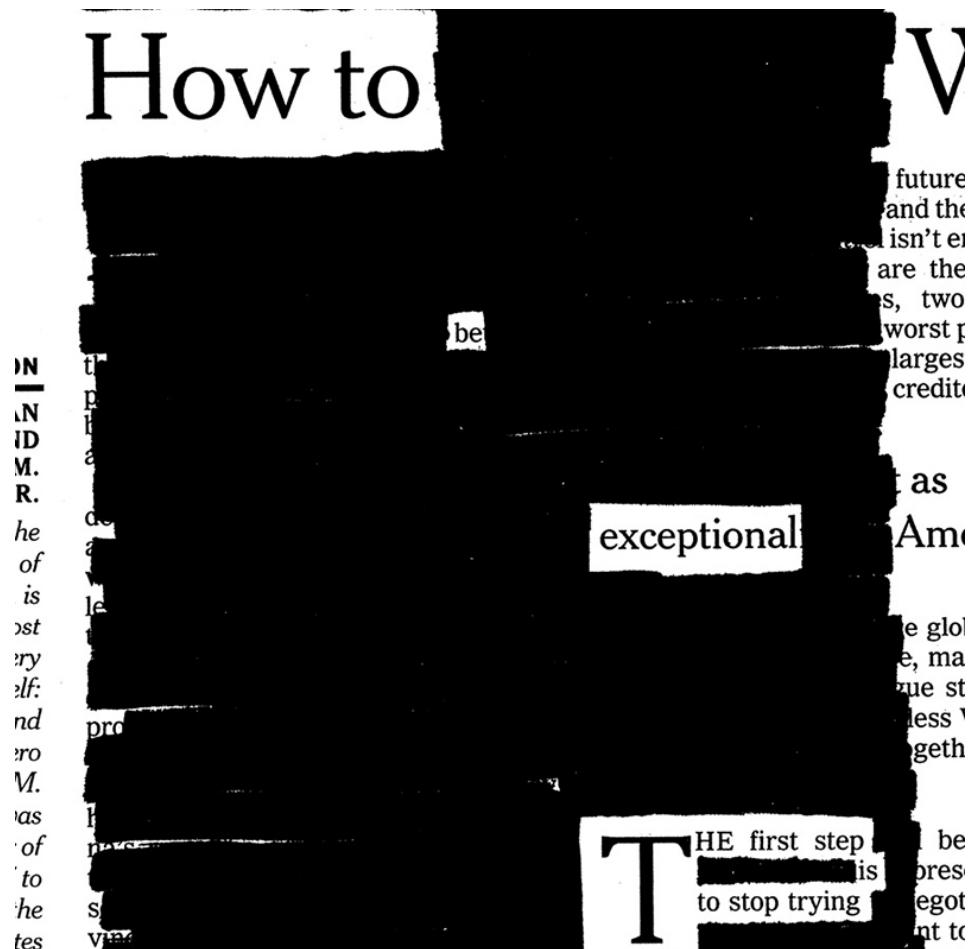
—Dave Grohl

About twenty years ago, a trashman in New York City named Nelson Molina started collecting little bits and pieces of art and unique objects that he found discarded along his route. His collection, The Trash Museum, is housed on the second floor of the Sanitation Department garage on East 99th Street, and it now features more than a thousand paintings, posters, photographs, musical instruments, toys, and other ephemera. There isn't a big unifying principle to the collection, just what Molina likes. He gets submissions from some of his fellow workers, but he says what goes on the wall and what doesn't. "I tell the guys, just bring it in and I'll decide if I can hang it." At some point, Molina painted a sign for the museum that reads treasure in the trash by nelson molina.

"Dumpster diving" is one of the jobs of the artist—finding the treasure in other people's trash, sifting through the debris of our culture, paying attention to the stuff that everyone else is ignoring, and taking inspiration from the stuff that people have tossed aside for whatever reasons. More than 400 years ago, Michel de Montaigne, in his essay "On Experience," wrote, "In my opinion, the most ordinary things, the most common and familiar, if we could see them in their true light, would turn out to be the grandest miracles . . . and the most marvelous examples." All it takes to uncover hidden gems is a clear eye, an open mind, and a willingness to search for inspiration in places other people aren't willing or able to go.



We all love things that other people think are garbage. You have to have the courage to keep loving your garbage, because what makes us unique is the diversity and breadth of our influences, the unique ways in which we mix up the parts of culture others have deemed “high” and the “low.”



When you find things you genuinely enjoy, don't let anyone else make you feel bad about it. Don't feel guilty about the pleasure you take in the things you enjoy. Celebrate them. When you share your taste and your influences, have the guts to own all of it. Don't give in to the pressure to self-edit too much. Don't be the lame guys at the record store arguing over who's the more “authentic” punk rock band. Don't try to be hip or cool. Being open and honest about what you like is the best way to connect with people who like those things, too.

“Do what you do best and link to the rest.”

—Jeff Jarvis

CREDIT IS ALWAYS DUE.

If you share the work of others, it's your duty to make sure that the creators of that work get proper credit. Crediting work in our copy-and-paste age of reblogs and retweets can seem like a futile effort, but it's worth it, and it's the right thing to do. You should always share the work of others as if it were your own, treating it with respect and care.

When we make the case for crediting our sources, most of us concentrate on the plight of the original creator of the work. But that's only half of the story—if you fail to properly attribute work that you share, you not only rob the person who made it, you rob all the people you've shared it with. Without attribution, they have no way to dig deeper into the work or find more of it.

So, what makes for great attribution? Attribution is all about providing context for what you're sharing: what the work is, who made it, how they made it, when and where it was made, why you're sharing it, why people should care about it, and where people can see some more work like it. Attribution is about putting little museum labels next to the stuff you share.

Another form of attribution that we often neglect is where we found the work that we're sharing. It's always good practice to give a shout-out to the people who've helped you stumble onto good work and also leave a bread-crumb trail that people you're sharing with can follow back to the sources of your inspiration. I've come across so many interesting people online by following "via" and "H/T" links—I'd have been robbed of a lot of these connections if it weren't for the generosity and meticulous attribution of many of the people I follow.

Online, the most important form of attribution is a hyperlink pointing back to the website of the creator of the work. This sends people who come across the work back to the original source. The number one

rule of the Internet: People are lazy. If you don't include a link, no one can click it. Attribution without a link online borders on useless: 99.9 percent of people are not going to bother Googling someone's name.

All of this raises a question: What if you want to share something and you don't know where it came from or who made it? The answer: Don't share things you can't properly credit. Find the right credit, or don't share.

