

| The best work
is the work you are excited about.

Ending to Start Anew (Regeneration)



Carl Jung was obsessed with building a round tower to live, think, and create in. The shape was important because he saw “life in the round as something forever coming into being and passing on.”

We are part of a constant, interconnected cycle of birth, death, and regeneration. Our bodies decay into the earth to bring forth new life, our energetic mind is returned to the universe to be repurposed.

Art exists in this same cycle of death and rebirth. We participate in this by completing one project so that we can start anew. As in life, each ending invites a fresh beginning. When consumed with a single work to the degree that we believe it’s our life’s mission, there’s no room for the next one to develop.

While the artist’s goal is greatness, it’s also to move forward. In service to the next project, we finish the current one. In service to the current project, we finish it so it can be set free into the world.

Sharing art is the price of making it. Exposing your vulnerability is the fee.

Out of this experience comes regeneration, finding freshness within yourself for the next project. And all the ones to follow.

Every artist creates a dynamic history. A living museum of finished objects. One work after another. Begun, completed, released. Begun, completed,

released. Over and over again. Each a time stamp commemorating a moment of passage. A moment filled with energy, now forever embodied in a work of art.

A work of art is not an end point in itself.

It's a station on a journey.

A chapter in our lives.

We acknowledge these transitions
by documenting each of them.

Play



Making art is a serious matter.

Harnessing creative energy from Source.

Shepherding ideas into the physical plane.

Participating in the cosmic cycle of creation.

The opposite is also true. Making art is pure play.

Within every artist, there's a child emptying a box of crayons onto the floor, searching for just the right color to draw the sky. It might be violet, olive, or burnt orange.

As artists, we strive to preserve this playfulness throughout the gravity of the enterprise. We embrace both the seriousness of the commitment and the playfulness of being completely free in the making.

Take art seriously without going about it in a serious way.

Seriousness saddles the work with a burden. It misses the playful side of being human. The chaotic exuberance of being present in the world. The lightness of pure enjoyment for enjoyment's sake.

In play, there are no stakes. No boundaries. No right or wrong. No quotas for productivity. It's an uninhibited state where your spirit can run free.

The best ideas arise most often and easily through this relaxed state.

Putting importance on the work too soon stirs up instincts of caution. Instead, we want to break free of the shackles of reality and avoid all forms of creative restraint.

Feel free to experiment. Make messes. Embrace randomness. When playtime is over, our adult aspect might come in to analyze: *What did the kids make today? I wonder if it's any good, and what it could mean.*

Each day is about showing up, building things, breaking them down, experimenting, and surprising ourselves. If a four-year-old loses interest in an activity, they don't try to complete it or force themselves to have fun with it. They just shift gears to a new quest. Another form of play.

Some aspects of the work can get tedious. In those moments, can you reengage with the spirit of the process from early on?

Once, in the studio with an artist, we were working on an up-tempo track. We decided to try it acoustically, which led us to add an interesting overdub. Then we muted everything except the overdub and heard it on its own, which led us in a whole new direction. Each different iteration led to a new version, none of it planned or attached to a preconceived notion.

In the end, a beautiful recording emerged that was nothing like the original vision of the song, and was only possible by allowing what was present to suggest a new possibility. Rather than following a plan, a path was taken blindly.

This can happen every day. Find a clue, follow a lead, remain unattached to what came before. And avoid getting stuck with a decision you made five minutes ago.

Think back to when you were a hopeful beginner, when the tools of your craft were exotic and new. **Remember the fascination of learning**, the joys of your first steps forward.

This might be the best way to retain the energy that drives the work, and to fall in love with the practice again and again.

Whether the work comes easily through play
or with difficulty through struggle,
the quality of the finished piece is unaffected.

The Art Habit

(Sangha)



If you're looking for the work to support you, you may be asking too much of it. We create *in service* to art, not for what we can get from art.

You may yearn for success as a way to leave an unfulfilling job and support yourself through your passion. This is a reasonable goal. However if the choice is between making great art and supporting yourself, the art comes first. Consider another way to make a living. Success is harder to come by when your life depends on it.

Art is an unstable career path for most. Financial reward often comes in waves, if at all. Some artists might have a vision for what they want to create, but may feel restrained because they don't believe it will pay the bills. It's okay to have a job that supports your art habit. Doing both is a better way of keeping the work pure.

There are jobs that demand your time but little else. You can protect the art you make by choosing an occupation that gives you mental space to formulate and develop your creative vision of the world.

Content can come from jobs that have nothing to do with your passion. Great ideas often originate from unexpected places. Many memorable songs have been written by people in occupations they didn't like.

Another choice is to seek a living in the field you're passionate about. It may be a gallery, a bookstore, a music studio, or a film set. If no jobs are available close to the action, ask if you can moonlight as an intern.

By choosing to be near what you love, you're offered a glimpse behind the scenes of the craft. You can observe the daily life of professional creators

and understand the industry and its infrastructure from the inside. After experiencing how it operates, you will come to know whether this path is worthy of your devotion.

Even if it means taking a pay cut initially, choosing this type of work could lead to unexpected opportunities later.

You can also pursue an unrelated career that provides security while keeping art as a hobby, a hobby that's the most important thing in your life. All paths are of equal merit.



Whatever you choose, it's helpful to have fellow travelers around you. They don't have to be *like* you, just like-minded in some way. Creativity is contagious. When we spend time with other artistic people, we absorb and exchange a way of thinking, a way of looking at the world. This group can be called a Sangha. Each person in this relationship begins seeing with a different imaginative eye.

It doesn't matter if their art form is the same as or different from yours. It's nourishing to be in a community of people who are enthusiastic about art, who you can have long discussions with, and with whom you can trade feedback on the work.

Being part of an artistic community can be one of the great joys of life.

The Prism of Self



Defining one's true self is not so simple. It may be impossible.

We inhabit many different versions of a changing self. The suggestion to *be yourself* may be too general to be of much use. There's being yourself as an artist, being yourself with your family, being yourself at work, being yourself with friends, being yourself in times of crisis or in times of peace, and being yourself for yourself, when by yourself.

In addition to these environmental variations, we are also always changing within. Our moods, our energy level, the stories we tell ourselves, our prior experiences, how hungry or tired we are: All these variants create a new way of being in each moment.

Depending on who we're with, where we are, and how safe or challenged we feel, we are changing all the time. Moving between different aspects of self.

We may have one aspect that wants to be more bold or subversive, which wrestles with our more agreeable, conflict-avoidant self. There may be a dreamer aspect, aspiring to inhabit vast magnificent worlds, at odds with our pragmatic side that questions our ability to make our dreams real.

There is a constant negotiation occurring between these various aspects. And each time we tune in to a particular one, different choices result, changing the outcome of our work.

In a prism, a single beam of light enters and is broken into an array of colors. The self, too, is a prism. Neutral events enter, and are transformed into a spectrum of feelings, thoughts, and sensations. All this information is

processed distinctively by each aspect of self, refracting life's light in its own way, and emitting different shades of art.

For this reason, not every work can reflect all of our selves. Perhaps it's never possible, no matter how hard we try. Instead, we might embrace the prism of self, and keep allowing reality to bend uniquely through us.

Like a kaleidoscope, we can adjust the aperture on our vision and change the results. We may aim to work from one particular aspect, like taking on a character, and create something from our darkest self or our most spiritual self. Those two works won't be the same, but they both come from us and they would both be true colors.

The more we accept our prismatic nature, the more free we become to create in different colors and the more we trust the inconsistent instincts we hold while making art.

We don't have to know why something is good or wonder if it's the "right" decision or if it reflects us accurately. It is simply the light our prism emits naturally at this moment in time.

| Any framework, method, or label
you impose on yourself
is just as likely to be a limitation
as an opening.

Let It Be



First, do no harm.

This credo is the well-known guiding principle of the physician's oath. Consider it a universal precept. If asked to participate in a fellow creator's project, proceed delicately.

In its rough form, an early iteration of a work may hold an extraordinary magic. Above all this is to be protected. When working alongside others, keep the oath front of mind.

Simple recognition of the strengths may be enough to move the project forward. A friend played me his current work asking for input. To my ear there was nothing to be added or changed. In the final mix, I suggested, skip the typical refining of balances and sounds. That standard would only water down a masterpiece. Sometimes the most valuable touch a collaborator can have is no touch at all.

Cooperation



The prism of self reflects an aspect of our being into our work. When more than one prism is applied, unexpected possibilities can be unlocked. Whether the perspectives contrast or complement each other, they combine to create a new vision.

Let's call this Cooperation.

Like awareness, cooperation is a practice. The more skillfully we participate in the process, the more comfortable it becomes.

Cooperation is comparable to the way a jazz ensemble improvises. A handful of collaborators, each with their own original point of view, work together to create a new whole, acting and reacting intuitively in the moment. You can lead the play or allow yourself to be led, enjoying the surprise of the unexpected. You can solo or lay out completely, as best serves the work.

Each time we cooperate, we're exposed to different ways of working and problem-solving, which can inform our creative process going forward.

Cooperation is not to be mistaken for competition. It is not a power struggle to get your way or to be proven right.

Competition serves the ego. Cooperation supports the highest outcome.

Think of cooperation as giving or getting a boost to see over a high wall. There's no power struggle in this act. You are simply finding the best route to a new perspective.

It is a disservice to the project to weigh our contribution to it. Believing an idea is best because it's *ours* is an error of inexperience. The ego demands personal authorship, inflating itself at the expense of the art. It can reject new methods that appear counterintuitive and protect familiar ones.

The best results are found when we're impartial and detached from our own strategies. We all benefit when the best idea is chosen, regardless of whether it's ours or not.



When I work with artists, we make an agreement:

We continue the process until reaching the point where we are *all* happy with the work. This is the ultimate goal of cooperation. If one person loves it but another does not, there's usually an underlying issue worth paying attention to. It likely means we haven't gone far enough and the work hasn't reached its full potential.

If one collaborator likes Choice A and another prefers Choice B, then the solution is not to choose A or B. It's to keep working until a Choice C is developed that both artists feel is superior. Choice C may incorporate elements of A, of B, of both, or of neither.

The moment one collaborator gives in and settles on a less preferential option for the sake of moving forward, everyone loses. Great decisions aren't made in a spirit of sacrifice. They're made by the mutual recognition of the best solution available.

If you already like the work in its current form, there's nothing to be lost by trying to better it until everyone loves it. You are not compromising. You are working together to surpass the current iteration.



We might not create equally with every partner. There can be incredibly talented people joining forces, yet for whatever reason, they don't resonate with each other. Or perhaps a participant doesn't work in the spirit of cooperation, and instead sets a tone of competition and persuasion.

If you never see eye to eye with a collaborator and after many iterations of the work can't arrive at something special, it might not be the right match.

At the same time, there may also be a misalignment if you *always* see eye to eye with a collaborator. We are not looking for someone who thinks like us, works like us, and shares our taste. If you and a collaborator agree on everything, then one of you may be unnecessary.

Imagine shining a beam of light through two filters of identical color. Whether apart or together, they produce the same hue. Whereas overlapping two contrasting filters produces a new shade.

In many of the greatest bands, collectives, and collaborations, a degree of polarity between members was part of the formula for greatness. The magic comes from a dynamic tension between different points of view, creating works more distinctive than a lone voice would.

Healthy tension in a collaboration is not uncommon. Friction allows the fire to come. As long as we're not attached to having it be our way, we welcome this friction. It's bringing us closer to the best version of the work at hand.

Some collaborations operate more like dictatorships than democracies. This system can work as well. In these cases, everyone agrees to line up behind one person's vision and do all they can to manifest it.

Whether the final decision is made by a single leader or a collective, it's still a collaborative act. The participants are offering up their best work in the spirit of cooperation.



Communication is the core of skillful cooperation.

When giving feedback, don't make it personal. **Always comment on the work itself and not the individual who made it.** If a participant takes a critique personally, they tend to shut down.

Be as specific as possible with your feedback. Zoom in to discuss the details of what you're seeing and feeling. The more clinical the feedback, the better it will be received.

Saying, "I think the colors in these two areas don't interact well together," is more helpful than, "I don't like the colors."

Though you may have a specific fix in mind, hold back from sharing it immediately. The recipient may be able to come up with a better solution on their own.

When on the receiving end of feedback, our task is to set aside ego and work to fully understand the critique offered. When one participant suggests a specific detail that could be improved, we might mistakenly think that the entire work is being called into question. Our ego can perceive assistance as interference.

It helps to keep in mind that language is an imperfect means of communication. An idea is altered and diluted through its mistranslation into words. Those words are then further distorted through our filter as we take them in, leaving us in a world of ambiguity.

It requires patience and diligence to get past the story of what you think you're hearing and get close to understanding what's actually being said.

When receiving feedback, a useful practice is to repeat back the information. You may find that what you heard isn't what was said. And what was said may not even be what was actually meant.

Ask questions to gain clarity. When collaborators patiently explain what aspects of the work they're focusing on, we may recognize that our visions are not in opposition. We're just using different language or noticing different elements.

When sharing observations, specificity creates space. It dissipates the level of emotional charge and enables us to work together in service of the piece.

The synergy of a group
is as important—
if not more important—
than the talent
of the individuals.

The Sincerity Dilemma



Most artists overvalue sincerity.

They strive to create art that expresses their truth. The truest version of themselves.

Sincerity, however, is an elusive characteristic. It is different from other goals we may have. Where greatness is a target worthy of our aim, setting our sights on sincerity may be counterproductive. The more we stretch to reach it, the farther away it recedes. When a work presents itself as sincere, it can be seen as saccharine. Sweetness made small. A hollow rhyme in a greeting card.

In art, sincerity is a by-product. It cannot be the primary aim.

We like to think of ourselves as consistent, rational beings, possessing certain attributes and not others. Yet a person who is completely consistent, who possesses no contradictions, comes across as less real. Wooden. Plastic.

The most truthful and irrational aspects of ourselves are often hidden, and our access to them lies through the creation of art. Each work tells us who we are, often in ways the audience understands before we do.

Creativity is an exploratory process to find the concealed material within. We won't always discover it. If we do, it may not make sense. A seed could draw us because it contains something we don't understand, and this vague attraction will be as close to knowing as we ever get.

Some aspects of the self don't like to be approached head-on. They prefer to arrive indirectly, in their own way. As sudden glimpses caught in accidental moments, like sunlight glinting off the surface of a wave.

These apparitions don't fit into words that can easily be expressed in ordinary language. They're extra-ordinary. Beyond the mundane. A poem can convey information that can't be transmitted through prose or conversation.

And all art is poetry.

Art goes deeper than thought. Deeper than the stories about yourself. It breaks through inner walls and accesses what's behind.

If we get out of the way and let the art do its work, it may yield the sincerity we seek. And sincerity may look nothing like we expected.

Anything that allows the audience
to access how you see the world
is accurate,
even if the information is wrong.

The Gatekeeper



No matter where your ideas come from or what they look like, they all eventually pass through a particular aspect of yourself: the editor, the gatekeeper.

This is who will determine the final expression of the work, regardless of how many selves were involved in its construction.

The editor's role is to gather and sift. Amplifying what's vital and whittling away the excess. Culling the work down to the best version of itself.

Sometimes the editor will find holes and send us out to gather data to fill them. Other times, there exists a wealth of information and the editor will remove what's unneeded to reveal the finished work.

Editing is a demonstration of taste. It isn't expressed through pointing to items we like: the music that pleases our ear or the films we revisit. Our taste is revealed in how our work is curated. What's included, what's not, and how the pieces are put together.

You may be drawn to different rhythms, colors, and patterns, though they might not live together harmoniously. The pieces must fit together in the container.

The container is the organizing principle of the work. It dictates which elements do and don't belong. The same furniture that suits a palace may not make sense in a monastery.

The editor is required to set ego aside. Ego pridefully attaches to individual elements of a work. The editor's role is to remain unattached and see beyond these passions to find unity and balance. Talented artists who are

unskilled editors can do subpar work and fail to live up to their gift's promise.

Avoid confusing the editor's cold detachment with the inner critic. The critic doubts the work, undermines it, zooms in and picks it apart. The editor steps back, views the work holistically, and supports its full potential.

The editor is the professional in the poet.



As we move closer to the completion of a project, it can be helpful to drastically cut the work back to only what's necessary, to conduct a *ruthless edit*.

Much of the creative process thus far has been additive. So think of this as the subtractive part of the project. It typically occurs after all the building has been completed and the options exhausted.

Often, editing is thought of as trimming, cutting away the fat. In the ruthless edit, this is not the case. We are deciding what absolutely has to be there in order for the work to still be itself, what is completely necessary.

We are not aiming to reduce the work to its final length. We are working to reduce it beyond its final length. Even if trimming away 5 percent will leave the work at the scale you intend for it, we may cut deeper and leave only half or a third.

If you're working on a ten-song album and you've recorded twenty songs, you're not aiming to reduce it to ten. You're shrinking it to five, to only the tracks you can't live without.

If you've written a book that's over three hundred pages, try to reduce it to less than a hundred without losing its essence.

In addition to getting to the heart of the work, through this brutal edit we change our relationship to it. We come to understand its underlying structure and realize what truly matters, to disconnect from the attachment of making it and see it for what it is.

What effect does each component have? Does it amplify the essence? Does it distract from the essence? Does it contribute to the balance? Does it

contribute to the structure? Is it absolutely necessary?

With the extra layers removed, you may stand back and notice that the work is successful as it is, in its simplest form. Or you may feel that you want to restore certain elements. As long as you're maintaining the integrity of the work, it's a matter of personal preference.

It's worth taking a moment to notice if any of your add-backs actually enhance the work. We're not looking for more for the sake of more. We're only looking for more for the sake of better.

The goal is to get the work to the point that when you see it, you know it couldn't have been arranged any other way. There's a sense of balance.

Of elegance.

It is not easy leaving behind elements you've put so much time and care into. Some artists fall in love with all the crafted material to the point where they resist letting go of an element even if the whole is better without it.

"Making the simple complicated is commonplace," Charles Mingus once said. "Making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity."

Being an artist
means to be continually asking,
“How can it be better?”
whatever *it* is.
It may be your art,
and it may be your life.

Why Make Art?



As you deepen your participation in the creative act, you may come across a paradox.

Ultimately, the act of self-expression isn't really about you.

Most who choose the artist's path don't have a choice. We feel compelled to engage, as if by some primal instinct, the same force that calls turtles toward the sea after hatching in the sand.

We follow this instinct. To deny it is dispiriting, as if we are in violation of nature. If we zoom out, we see this blind impulse is always there, guiding our aim beyond ourselves.

In the moment when we feel the work is taking shape, there's a dynamic surge, followed by an urge to share, in the hopes of replicating that mysterious emotional charge in others.

This is the call to self-express, our creative purpose. It's not necessarily to understand ourselves or be understood. We share our filter, our way of seeing, in order to spark an echo in others. Art is a reverberation of an impermanent life.

As human beings, we come and go quickly, and we get to make works that stand as monuments to our time here. Enduring affirmations of existence. Michelangelo's *David*, the first cave paintings, a child's finger-paint landscapes—they all echo the same human cry, like graffiti scrawled in a bathroom stall:

I was here.

When you contribute your point of view to the world, others can see it. It's refracted through their filter and distributed again. This process is continuous and ongoing. Taken all together, it creates what we experience as reality.

Every work, no matter how trivial it may seem, plays a role in this greater cycle. The world continually unfolds. Nature renews itself. Art evolves.

Each of us has our own way of seeing this world. And this can lead to feelings of isolation. Art has an ability to connect us beyond the limitations of language.

Through this, we get to face our inner world outward, remove the boundaries of separation, and participate in the great remembering of what we came into this life knowing: There is no separation. We are one.

The reason we're alive

is to express ourselves in the world.

And creating art may be the most

effective and beautiful method of doing so.

Art goes beyond language, beyond lives.

It's a universal way to send messages

between each other and through time.

Harmony



The invisible threads of mathematics are laced through all natural beauty.

We can find the same ratios at work in the spirals of seashells and galaxies. In flower petals, DNA molecules, hurricanes, and the design of the human face.

Certain proportions create a sense of holy balance.

Our point of reference for beauty is nature. When we come upon these ratios when making art, they soothe us. Our creations are inspired by the relationships that we are most awed by.

The Parthenon, the Great Pyramid, Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man*, Brancusi's *Bird in Space*, Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*: these works all rely on the same geometry found in nature.

The universe holds a sense of harmony, a beautifully deep interdependent system. When you step back from a project you have been working on for some time and recognize a new symmetry you never knew was possible, you will likely feel a calm satisfaction. An excitement that contains at its core a sense of peace. Order appears. A harmonic resonance is palpable. You are a participant in this intricate mechanism.

In music, the rules of harmony are laid out in formulas. Each note has a vibrational wavelength, and every wavelength has a specific relationship to the others. Following mathematical principles, one can calculate harmonic pairings of these waves.

All elements have wavelengths: objects, colors, ideas. When we combine them, a new vibration is generated. Sometimes that vibration is harmonious,

and other times it's dissonant.

We don't need to understand the math to create powerful work from these vibrations. For some, understanding the mathematics undermines their natural intuitive sense. We tune in to ourselves to feel harmony. We use the intellect in an attempt to explain it only after the fact.

For those who don't come to this knowing naturally, it can be developed, given time. Through practiced attunement, you can grow alert to these natural resonances. More acutely sensing what's in balance and recognizing the divine proportions. When you're creating or completing a work, there's a clearer recognition, a harmonic ring. There's a sense of accord. A coherence. The individual elements merge and become one.

A great work doesn't have to be in harmony. Sometimes the point of the art is to show imbalance or to create a sense of unease.

In a song, when you hear a dissonant harmony suddenly fall in tune, there's a pleasing effect. That's why the discordant choice may be of interest. It creates tension and release, drawing our attention to the harmony we may not have otherwise noticed.

As we move deeper into alignment with fundamental harmonic principles in our craft, we might be able to recognize them everywhere we look. By working in the specific, our tastes become more refined in the general as well.

When we are unable to recognize the harmony in the universe around us, it's probably because we're not taking in enough data. If we zoom out or zoom in far enough, the integrated nature of all there is becomes clear.

Just as each small stroke on a canvas can't step aside to see the whole painting, we're unable to take in the great whole of relationships and counterbalance that surrounds us in all directions.

Our inability to comprehend the inner workings of the universe may actually bring us more in tune with its infinitude. The magic is not in the analyzing or the understanding. The magic lives in the wonder of what we do not know.