

Practice



In the wild, animals must narrow their field of vision to survive. A tight focus prevents distraction from critical needs.

Food,
Shelter,
Predators,
Procreation.

For the artist, this reflexive action can be a hindrance. Widening one's scope allows for more moments of interest to be noticed and collected, building a treasury of material to draw from later.

A *practice* is the embodiment of an approach to a concept. This can support us in bringing about a desired state of mind. When we repeat the exercise of opening our senses to what is, we move closer to living in a continually open state. We build a habit. One where expanded awareness is our default way of being in the world.

To deepen this practice is to embark on a more profound relationship with Source. As we reduce the interference of our filter, we become better able to recognize the rhythms and movements around us. This allows us to participate with them in a more harmonious way.

When we take notice of the cycles of the planet, and choose to live in accordance with its seasons, something remarkable happens. We become connected.

We begin to see ourselves as part of a greater whole that is constantly regenerating itself. And we may then tap into this all-powerful propagating force and ride its creative wave.



To support our practice, we might set up a daily schedule, where we engage in particular rituals at specific times every day or week.

The gestures we perform don't need to be grand. Small rituals can make a big difference.

We can decide to take three slow, deep breaths upon awakening each morning. This simple act can set a course to start each day still, centered, and in the moment.

We might also eat our meals mindfully, slowly savoring each bite with appreciation. Take a daily walk in nature, looking at everything entering our field of vision with gratitude and connection. Take a moment to marvel at the feeling of our heartbeat and the movement of blood through our veins before sleep.

The purpose of such exercises is not necessarily in the doing, just as the goal of meditation isn't in the meditating. The purpose is to evolve the way we see the world when we're not engaged in these acts. We are building the musculature of our psyche to more acutely tune in. This is so much of what the work is about.

Awareness needs constant refreshing. If it becomes a habit, even a good habit, it will need to be reinvented again and again.

Until one day, you notice that you are always in the practice of awareness, at all times, in all places, living your life in a state of constant openness to receiving.

Living life as an artist is a practice.
You are either engaging in the practice
or you're not.

It makes no sense to say you're not good at it.
It's like saying, "I'm not good at being a monk."
You are either living as a monk or you're not.

We tend to think of the artist's work as the output.

The real work of the artist
is a way of being in the world.

Submerge (The Great Works)



Broadening our practice of awareness is a choice we can make at any moment.

It is not a search, though it is stoked by a curiosity or hunger. A hunger to see beautiful things, hear beautiful sounds, feel deeper sensations. To learn, and to be fascinated and surprised on a continual basis.

In service of this robust instinct, consider submerging yourself in the canon of great works. Read the finest literature, watch the masterpieces of cinema, get up close to the most influential paintings, visit architectural landmarks. There's no standard list; no one has the same measures of greatness. The "canon" is continually changing, across time and space. Nonetheless, exposure to great art provides an invitation. It draws us forward, and opens doors of possibility.

If you make the choice of reading classic literature every day for a year, rather than reading the news, by the end of that time period you'll have a more honed sensitivity for recognizing greatness from the books than from the media.

This applies to every choice we make. Not just with art, but with the friends we choose, the conversations we have, even the thoughts we reflect on. All of these aspects affect our ability to distinguish good from very good, very good from great. **They help us determine what's worthy of our time and attention.**

Because there's an endless amount of data available to us and we have a limited bandwidth to conserve, we might consider carefully curating the

quality of what we allow in.

This doesn't just apply if your goal is to make art of lasting significance. Even if your goal is to make fast food, it will likely taste better if you experience the best fresh food available to you during the process. Level up your taste.

The objective is not to learn to mimic greatness, but **to calibrate our internal meter for greatness.** So we can better make the thousands of choices that might ultimately lead to our own great work.

Nature as Teacher



Of all the great works that we can experience, nature is the most absolute and enduring. We can witness it change through the seasons. We can see it in the mountains, the oceans, the deserts, and the forest. We can watch the changes of the moon each night, and the relationship between the moon and the stars.

There is never a shortage of awe and inspiration to be found outdoors. If we dedicated our lives solely to noticing changes in natural light and shadow as the hours pass, we would constantly discover something new.

We don't have to understand nature to appreciate it. This is true of all things. Simply be aware of moments when your breath gets taken away by something of great beauty.

It may be witnessing a single-line formation of birds snaking through a half-lit evening sky, or standing awed at the foot of a giant redwood tree that's thousands of years old. There's so much wisdom in nature that when we notice it, it awakens possibility within us. It is through communing with nature that we move closer to our own nature.

If you're picking colors based on a Pantone book, you're limited to a certain number of choices. If you step out in nature, the palette is infinite. Each rock has such a variation of color within it, we could never find a can of paint to mimic the exact same shade.

Nature transcends our tendencies to label and classify, to reduce and limit. The natural world is unfathomably more rich, interwoven, and complicated than we are taught, and so much more mysterious and beautiful.

Deepening our connection to nature will serve our spirit, and what serves our spirit invariably serves our artistic output.

The closer we can get to the natural world, the sooner we start to realize we are not separate. And that when we create, we are not just expressing our unique individuality, but our seamless connection to an infinite oneness.

There's a reason we are drawn
to gazing at the ocean.
It is said the ocean provides
a closer reflection of who
we are than any mirror.

Nothing Is Static



The world is always changing.

You can engage in the same awareness practice five days in a row in the same location and have a unique experience each time.

Different sounds and different smells may be present. No two gusts of wind feel quite the same. The tone and quality of sunlight changes from minute to minute and day to day.

Within the richness of nature, the variations are easily noticeable. Some are shouts, others whispers. Even if an element seems static, whether a work of art in a museum or an everyday object in a kitchen, when we look at it deeply, we can see a newness. We recognize aspects unnoticed before. Reread the same book over and over, and we'll likely find new themes, undercurrents, details, and connections.

You can't step into the same stream twice because it's always flowing. Everything is.

The world is constantly changing, so no matter how often we practice paying attention, there will always be something new to notice. It's up to us to find it.

Likewise, we are always changing, growing, evolving. We learn and forget things. We move through different moods, thoughts, and unconscious processes. The cells in our body die and regenerate. No one is the same person all day long.

Even if the world outside were to remain static, the information we took in would still be ever-changing. And so too would the work we bring forth.

The person who makes something today
isn't the same person
who returns to the work tomorrow.

Look Inward



The sound of water churning in the distance is audible.

I feel a breeze of what might be warm air, though it's difficult to tell, since my arm hair senses the movement as cooling.

Two birds are singing and, with my eyes closed, I'm placing them approximately fifty paces behind me and to my right.

Now a smaller bird, or at least one with a smaller and higher pitched chirp, enters the soundscape behind me to the left. From the rhythmic interplay, it seems clear the birds are not in conversation. Each sings its own song.

I notice the sound of a passing vehicle and, in the distance, children's voices. A blur of rhythmic music arrives from the far left.

There is an itch on the left side of my face, just in front of my ear.

A vehicle with a larger, heavier sound passes and a bit of jazz music makes an appearance much closer to my position. Only now do I realize I turned it on earlier at a quiet volume and it had been inaudible until this moment.

Someone arrives. I open my eyes. And it all goes away.

It's common to believe that life is a series of external experiences. And that we must live an outwardly extraordinary life in order to have something to share. The experience of our inner world is often completely overlooked.

If we focus on what's going on inside ourselves—sensations, emotions, the patterns of our thoughts—a wealth of material can be found. Our inner

world is every bit as interesting, beautiful, and surprising as nature itself. It is, after all, born of nature.

When we go inside, we are processing what's going on outside. We're no longer separate. We're connected. We are one.

Ultimately, it doesn't make a difference whether your content originates on the inside or the outside. If a beautiful thought or phrase comes to mind, or if you see a beautiful sunset, one's not better than the other. Both are equally beautiful in different ways. It's helpful to consider there are always more options available to us than we might realize.

Memories and the Subconscious



When presented with new instrumental tracks for the first time, some vocalists record the first sounds out of their mouths, with no thought or preparation.

Often they'll sing random words or sounds that aren't words at all. It isn't uncommon, out of the gibberish, for a story to unfold or key phrases to appear.

There's no active attempt to write in this process. The work is being created on a subconscious level. The material exists hidden within.

There are practices that can assist in accessing this deeper well inside yourself. For example, you can try an anger-releasing exercise where you beat on a pillow for five minutes. It's more difficult than you might think to do this for the full duration. Time yourself and go hard. Then immediately fill five pages with whatever comes out.

The objective is to not think about it, to avoid directing the content in any way. Just write whatever words spill forth.

There's an abundant reservoir of high-quality information in our subconscious, and finding ways to access it can spark new material to draw from.

The psyche has admittance to a universal wisdom deeper than what we can come up with in our conscious mind. It provides a far less limited view. An oceanic source.

We don't know how it works and we don't know why it works, yet many artists tap into something beyond themselves without recognizing the process at play, purely through accessing the subconscious.

Often, reaching these states is outside of our control. Some artists have created their best works while feverish, with a temperature over 103. These trancelike conditions bypass the thinking part of the brain and access the dream state.

There's great wisdom in transitional realms between wakefulness and sleep. Right before you fall asleep, what thoughts and ideas come to you? How do you feel when you wake from a dream?

In the wisdom tradition of Tibetan dream yoga, among others, lamas say the dream state is just as real—or unreal—as the waking state.

Keeping a dream journal might be of use. Place a pen and paper next to the bed, and as soon as you wake up, begin writing immediately with as much detail as possible before doing anything else. Try to limit any unnecessary movement. Simply turning your head can be enough to dislodge the dream from stored memory.

As you write, the picture will develop and you'll remember more of the story, more of the setting, more of the details than you did when you first set your pen to paper. The more you do this practice, morning after morning, the better you will get at recalling your dreams. It may also help to set an intention to remember your dreams before going to sleep.

Memories can also be thought of as dreamlike. They're more a romantic story than a faithful document of a life event. And there's good content to be found in these dreamy recollections we have of past experiences.

Another helpful tool is randomness—or, more accurately, apparent randomness, since there may be organization happening on a different level than we understand.

When we throw the I Ching, for example, we don't determine how the sticks or coins land. But through them, we get information we can use to help decision making, and once again bypass our conscious mind and perhaps tap into a larger intelligence.

It's Always There



I'm strongly affected by the sun. When it's a bright day, I feel energized. When it's gloomy, I'm gloomy.

On those overcast days, it helps to tune in to the fact that the sun is still there. It's just hidden behind a thicker layer of clouds. At noon, the sun is high in the sky, regardless of how light or dark it is outside.

In the same way, regardless of how much we're paying attention, the information we seek is out there. If we're aware, we get to tune in to more of it. If we're less aware, we miss it.

When we miss it, it really does pass us by. Tomorrow presents another opportunity for awareness, but it's never an opportunity for the same awareness.

Setting



We're affected by our surroundings, and finding the best environment to create a clear channel is personal and to be tested. It also depends on your intention.

Isolated places like a forest, a monastery, or a sailboat in the middle of the ocean are fine locations to receive direct transmissions from the universe.

If instead you want to tune in to the collective consciousness, you might sit in a busy spot with people coming and going and experience Source as filtered through humanity. This secondhand approach is no less valid.

One step further removed might be to plug into the culture itself, constantly consuming art, entertainment, news, and social media. All the while noticing the patterns the universe is promoting.

It's helpful to view currents in the culture without feeling obligated to follow the direction of their flow. Instead, notice them in the same connected, detached way you might notice a warm wind. Let yourself move within it, yet not be *of* it.

One person's connected place may be another's distraction. And different environments may be right at different points in your artistic process. Andy Warhol was said to create with a television, radio, and record player all on simultaneously. For Eminem, the noise of a single TV set is his preferred backdrop for writing. Marcel Proust lined his walls with sound-absorbing cork, closed the drapes, and wore earplugs. Kafka too took his need for silence to an extreme—"not like a hermit," he once said, but "like a dead man." **There is no wrong way. There is only your way.**

It's not always easy to follow the subtle energetic information the universe broadcasts, especially when your friends, family, coworkers, or those with a business interest in your creativity are offering seemingly rational advice that challenges your intuitive knowing. To the best of my ability, I've followed my intuition to make career turns, and been recommended against doing so every time. It helps to realize that **it's better to follow the universe than those around you.**

Interference may also come from the voices within. The ones in your head that murmur you're not talented enough, your idea isn't good enough, art isn't a worthwhile investment of your time, the result won't be well-received, you're a failure if the creation isn't successful. It's helpful to turn those voices down so you can hear the chimes of the cosmic clock ring, reminding you it's time.

Your time to participate.

Self-Doubt



Self-doubt lives in all of us. And while we may wish it gone, it is there to serve us.

Flaws are human, and the attraction of art is the humanity held in it. If we were machinelike, the art wouldn't resonate. It would be soulless. With life comes pain, insecurity, and fear.

We're all different and we're all imperfect, and the imperfections are what makes each of us and our work interesting. We create pieces reflective of who we are, and if insecurity is part of who we are, then our work will have a greater degree of truth in it as a result.

The making of art is not a competitive act. Our work is representative of the self. You would be amiss to say, "I'm not up to the challenge." Yes, you may need to deepen your craft to fully realize your vision. If you're not up to it, no one else can do it. Only you can. You're the only one with your voice.

The people who choose to do art are, many times, the most vulnerable. There are singers considered among the best in the world who can't bring themselves to listen to their own voice. And these are not rare exceptions. Many artists in different arenas have similar issues.

The sensitivity that allows them to make the art is the same vulnerability that makes them more tender to being judged. Still, many continue to share their work and risk criticism in spite of this. It's as if they have no other choice. Being an artist is who they are, and they are made whole through self-expression.

If a creator is so afraid of judgment that they're unable to move forward, it might be that the desire to share the work isn't as strong as the desire to

protect themselves. Perhaps art isn't their role. Their temperament might serve a different pursuit. This path is not for everyone. Adversity is part of the process.

We are not obligated to follow this calling because we have a talent or skill. It's worth remembering that we are blessed to get to create. It's a privilege. We're choosing it. We're not being ordered to do this. If we'd rather not do it, let's not do it.

Some successful artists are deeply insecure, self-sabotaging, struggling with addiction, or facing other obstacles to making and sharing their work. An unhealthy self-image or a hardship in life can fuel great art, creating a deep well of insight and emotion for an artist to draw from. They can also get in the way of the artist being able to make many things over a long period of time.

People who are particularly challenged in this sense generally can't produce creative work over and over again. This isn't because they're not artistically capable, but because they were only able to break through their own issues one or two times and share great work.

One of the reasons so many great artists die of overdoses early in their lives is because they're using drugs to numb a very painful existence. The reason it's painful is the reason they became artists in the first place: **their incredible sensitivity.**

If you see tremendous beauty or tremendous pain where other people see little or nothing at all, you're confronted with big feelings all the time. These emotions can be confusing and overwhelming. When those around you don't see what you see and feel what you feel, this can lead to a sense of isolation and a general feeling of not belonging, of otherness.

These charged emotions, powerful when expressed in the work, are the same dark clouds that beg to be numbed to allow sleep or to get out of bed and face the day in the morning. It's a blessing and a curse.

Make It Up



While the emotional undercurrents of self-doubt can serve the art, they can also interfere with the creative process. Beginning a work, completing a work, and sharing a work—these are key moments where many of us become stuck.

How do we move forward, considering the stories we tell ourselves?

One of the best strategies is to lower the stakes.

We tend to think that what we're making is the most important thing in our lives and that it's going to define us for all eternity. Consider moving forward with the more accurate point of view that it's a small work, a beginning. The mission is to complete the project so you can move on to the next. That next one is a stepping-stone to the following work. And so it continues in productive rhythm for the entirety of your creative life.

All art is a work in progress. It's helpful to see the piece we're working on as an experiment. One in which we can't predict the outcome. Whatever the result, we will receive useful information that will benefit the next experiment.

If you start from the position that there is no right or wrong, no good or bad, and creativity is just free play with no rules, it's easier to submerge yourself joyfully in the process of making things.

We're not playing to win, we're playing to play. And ultimately, playing is fun. Perfectionism gets in the way of fun. A more skillful goal might be to find comfort in the process. To make and put out successive works with ease.

Oscar Wilde said that some things are too important to be taken seriously. Art is one of those things. Setting the bar low, especially to get started, frees

you to play, explore, and test without attachment to results.

This is not just a path to more supportive thoughts. Active play and experimentation until we're happily surprised is how the best work reveals itself.



Another approach to overcoming insecurities is to label them. I was working with an artist who was frozen by doubts and unable to move forward. I asked if he was familiar with the Buddhist concept of *papancha*, which translates as *preponderance of thoughts*. This speaks to the mind's tendency to respond to our experiences with an avalanche of mental chatter.

He responded, "I know exactly what that is. That's me."

Now that he had a name for what was holding him back, he was able to normalize his doubts and not take them so seriously. When they came up, we'd call them *papancha*, notice them, then move forward.

I was in a meeting with another artist who had just released a very successful album, but felt afraid to do more work and listed different reasons why she didn't want to make music anymore. There are always good reasons not to continue.

"It's fine, you don't have to make music ever again. There's nothing wrong with that. Just stop if it's not making you happy. It's your choice."

As soon as I said this, her expression changed and she realized she would be happier creating than not creating.

Gratitude can also help. Realizing you are fortunate to be in a position that allows you to create, and in some cases get paid to do what you love, might tip the balance in favor of the work.

Ultimately, your desire to create must be greater than your fear of it.

Even for some of the greatest artists, that fear never goes away. One legendary singer, despite performing for over five decades, was never able to eliminate his stage fright. Despite a terror so strong it made him sick to his stomach, he still stepped into the spotlight each night and performed a

spellbinding show. By accepting self-doubt, rather than trying to eliminate or repress it, we lessen its energy and interference.



It's worth noting the distinction between doubting the work and doubting yourself. An example of doubting the work would be, "I don't know if my song is as good as it can be." Doubting yourself might sound like, "I can't write a good song."

These statements are worlds apart, both in accuracy and in impact on the nervous system. Doubting yourself can lead to a sense of hopelessness, of not being inherently fit to take on the task at hand. All or nothing thinking is a nonstarter.

However, doubting the quality of your work might, at times, help to improve it. You can doubt your way to excellence.

If you have an imperfect version of a work you really love, you may find that when it finally seems perfect, you don't love it in the same way. This is a sign the imperfect version was actually the one. The work is not about perfection.

One thing I learned through having spellcheck is that I regularly make up words. I'll type a word and then the computer will tell me it doesn't exist. Since it sounds like what I'm aiming to say, I sometimes decide to use it anyway. I know what it means, and perhaps the reader will understand the meaning better than if I used an actual word.

The imperfections you're tempted to fix might prove to be what make the work great. And sometimes not. We rarely know what makes a piece great. No one can know. The most plausible reasons are theories at best. *Why* is beyond our comprehension.

The Leaning Tower of Pisa was an architectural error, which builders further exacerbated by trying to fix. Now, hundreds of years later, it's one of the most visited buildings in the world precisely because of this mistake.

In Japanese pottery, there's an artful form of repair called kintsugi. When a piece of ceramic pottery breaks, rather than trying to restore it to its original

condition, the artisan accentuates the fault by using gold to fill the crack. This beautifully draws attention to where the work was broken, creating a golden vein. Instead of the flaw diminishing the work, it becomes a focal point, an area of both physical and aesthetic strength. The scar also tells the story of the piece, chronicling its past experience.

We can apply this same technique to ourselves and embrace our imperfections. Whatever insecurities we have can be reframed as a guiding force in our creativity. They only become a hindrance when they prevent our ability to share what's closest to our heart.

| Art creates a profound connection
| between the artist and the audience.
| Through that connection,
| both can heal.

Distraction



Distraction is one of the best tools available to the artist when used skillfully. In some cases, it's the only way to get where we are going.

When meditating, as soon as the mind quiets, the sense of space can be overtaken by a worry or a random thought. This is why many meditation schools teach students to use a mantra. An automatic, repeated phrase leaves little room in the mind for thoughts that pull us out of the moment.

The mantra, then, is a distraction. And while certain distractions can take you out of the present moment, others can keep the conscious part of yourself busy so that the unconscious is freed up to work for you. Worry beads, rosaries, and malas work in the same way.

When we reach an impasse at any point in the creative process, it can be helpful to step away from the project to create space and allow a solution to appear.

We might hold a problem to be solved lightly in the back of our consciousness instead of the front of our mind. This way, we can remain present with it over time while engaging in a simple, unrelated task. Examples include driving, walking, swimming, showering, washing dishes, dancing, or performing any activity we can accomplish on autopilot. At times, physical movement can spur ideas to move too.

Some musicians, for example, do a better job of writing melodies while driving than sitting in a room with an audio recorder on. These types of distractions keep one part of the mind busy while freeing the rest to remain open to whatever comes in. Perhaps this process of *nonthinking thought*

allows us to access a different part of our brain. One that can see more angles than the direct path.

Distraction is not procrastination. Procrastination consistently undermines our ability to make things. Distraction is a strategy in service of the work.

| Sometimes disengaging
| is the best way to engage.

Collaboration



Nothing begins with us.

The more we pay attention, the more we begin to realize that all the work we ever do is a collaboration.

It's a collaboration with the art that's come before you and the art that will come after. It's also a collaboration with the world you're living in. With the experiences you've had. With the tools you use. With the audience. And with who you are today.

The "self" has many distinct aspects. It's possible to create a piece, love it, and then look at it the next day and feel completely different about it. The inspired-artist aspect of your self may be in conflict with the craftsperson aspect, disappointed that the craftsperson is unable to create the physical embodiment of the inspired artist's vision. This is a common conflict for creators, since there is no direct conversion from abstract thought to the material world. The work is always an interpretation.

There are many different hats the artist wears, and creativity is an internal discussion between these aspects of self. The negotiation continues until the selves create the best work they can together.

The work itself also wears different hats. You may make a piece and feel you know exactly what it is, then someone else may experience it and sense they know what it is, and yet what you see and what they see may be completely different. What's of particular interest about this is that neither one is right. And both are right.

This is not something to be concerned about. If the artist is happy with the work they're creating and the viewer is enlivened by the work they're

experiencing, it doesn't matter if they see it in the same way. In fact, it is impossible for anyone to experience your work as you do, or as anyone else does.

You could have a distinct idea of what a piece means, how it functions, or why it's pleasing—and someone else can like it or dislike it for an entirely different reason.

The purpose of the work is to awaken something in you first, and then allow something to be awakened in others. And it's fine if they're not the same thing. We can only hope that the *magnitude* of the charge we experience reverberates as powerfully for others as it does for us.

Sometimes the artist may not be the crafter of the work. Marcel Duchamp would find everyday objects—a snow shovel, a bicycle wheel, a urinal—and simply decide they were art. He called them readymades. A painting is just a painting until you put a frame on it and hang it on the wall, then it's called art.

What's considered art is simply an agreement. And none of it is true.

What is true is that you are never alone when you're making art. You are in a constant dialogue with what is and what was, and the closer you can tune in to that discussion, the better you can serve the work before you.

Intention



An old man in Calcutta would walk to get water from a well every day. He'd carry a clay pot and lower it by hand slowly, all the way down, careful not to let it hit the sides of the well and break.

Once it was full, he'd raise the pot slowly and carefully again. It was a focused, time-consuming act.

One day, a traveler noticed the old man engaged in this difficult task. More experienced with mechanics, he showed the old man how to use a pulley system.

"This will allow the pot to go straight down quickly," the traveler explained, "then fill with water and come back up, without hitting the sides. It's much easier and the pot will be just as full with much less work."

The old man looked at him and said, "I think I'm going to keep doing it the way I always have. I really have to think about each movement and there's a great deal of care that goes into doing it right. I'd imagine if I were to use the pulley, it would become easy and I might even start thinking about something else while doing it. If I put so little care and time into it, what might the water taste like? It couldn't possibly taste as good."

Our thoughts, feelings, processes, and unconscious beliefs have an energy that is hidden in the work. This unseen, unmeasurable force gives each piece its magnetism. A completed project is only made up of our intention and our experiments around it. Remove intention and all that's left is the ornamental shell.