

Essence



All the work we do, no matter how intricate, holds an underlying essence. A core identity or fundamental structure, like a skeleton supporting flesh. Some might call it an “is-ness.”

If a child draws a picture of a house, it may have a window, a roof, and a door. If you take away the window and look at the picture, it’s still a house. If you take away the door, it’s still a house. If you take away the roof and the outer walls, and leave the window and the door, it is no longer clear whether it’s still a house.

In the same way, each piece of art has a unique, life-giving feature that makes it what it is. It might be the theme, the organizing principle, the artist’s point of view, the quality of the performance, the materials, the mood conveyed, or a combination of elements. Any of these can play a role in forming the essence.

If a sculptor makes a work out of stone or out of clay, the experience of that work is very different. Yet a work of stone and one of clay can have the same essence.

The essence is always there, and our job in the Craft phase is not to obscure it. A work’s essence may also change, from the time you start until the time you finish. As you refine the work, add elements, and move pieces around, a new, different essence may emerge.

Sometimes you may not yet know the essence when you’re engaged in the work. You’re merely experimenting and playing. When you end up with something you like, you may come to realize what the essence is.

Distilling a work to get it as close to its essence as possible is a useful and informative practice. Notice how many pieces you can remove before the work you're making ceases to be the work you're making.

Refine it to the point where it is stripped bare, in its least decorative form yet still intact. With nothing extra. Sometimes the ornamentation can be of use, often not. **Less is generally more.**

If you have two units you want to put together, whether it be two sentences or two parts of a song, there can be a tremendous amount of power in doing so without using a transition. **Try finding the simplest, most elegant way to put a point across,** with the least amount of information.

If there's any question as to whether an element serves the piece, it's probably a good idea to let it go. Some artists get superstitious about removing aspects of a work, as if it will make the project evaporate before their eyes. So it's worth remembering that anything taken away can always be put back later, if needed.

Perfection is finally obtained not when there is no longer anything to add, but **when there's no longer anything to take away.**

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Wind, Sand and Stars*

In the end,
the sum total of the essence
of our individual works
may serve as a reflection.
The closer we get
to the true essence of each work,
the sooner they will somehow,
at some point in time,
provide clues as to our own.

Apocrypha



Every artist has heroes.

Creators whose work we connect with, whose methods we aspire to, whose words we cherish. These exceptional talents can seem beyond human, like mythological figures.

From a distance, what can we know to be true?

Without witnessing a beloved work's actual creation, it's impossible to know what truly happened. And if we did observe the process with our own eyes, our account would be an outside interpretation at best.

The stories about how works get made and the rituals of the artists who make them are generally exaggerated, and often pure fiction.

A work of art happens naturally, of its own accord. We may wonder where the underlying idea came from and how each individual element was put together to produce such a masterwork. But nobody knows how or why these things happen. Often, not even the maker.

In cases when the artist thinks they know, their interpretation may not be accurate or the whole story.

We live in a mysterious world full of uncertainties. And we regularly make assumptions to explain them. Coming to terms with the complexity of our human experience allows us to exit our natural state of confusion. To survive.

Generally our explanations are guesses. These vague hypotheticals become fixed in our minds as fact. We are interpretation machines, and this process of labeling and detaching is efficient but not accurate. We are the unreliable narrators of our own experience.

So when an artist creates a work that comes together by an unseen hand, and the process is later analyzed, what we get is more storytelling. This is art history. Art reality is forever unknown.

These stories may be interesting and fun to think about. But to believe a specific method is responsible for the quality of a work is misleading. Especially if it causes you to repeat that process in hopes of achieving a similar result.

Legendary figures in art and history are sometimes held up as deities. It is counterproductive to measure ourselves against them because they never existed as such. They are beings with typical human vulnerabilities and flaws just like us.

Each artist works with their own balance of strengths and weaknesses. And there is no rule that more praiseworthy strengths or romanticized self-destruction equals better art. Expressing yourself is all that matters.

All art is a form of poetry. It's always changing, never fixed. We may think we know what a piece we made means, yet over time that interpretation may change. The creator stops being the creator once they finish the work. They then become the viewer. And the viewer can bring as much of their own meaning to a piece as the creator.

We will never know a work's true meaning. It's helpful to remember that there are forces at work beyond our comprehension. Let's make art, and let others make the stories.

| We are dealing in a magic realm.
| Nobody knows why or how it works.

Tuning Out (Undermining Voices)



We may take years, even decades, to create our first project. It typically develops in a vacuum, in an ordinary way, in a conversation mostly with ourselves.

After we share it, outside influences can emerge. An audience appears, whether it consists of friends or large groups of strangers. Individuals and companies with business interests can sign on. And as we begin to work on our next project, loud outer voices may speak at us from the sidelines, influencing us in different creative directions. Demanding the work now, without concern for quality.

As these voices enter an artist's head—concern for deadlines, deals, sales, media attention, public image, staff, overhead, growing the audience, keeping the existing fan base—they can undermine our focus. The intention of our art can shift from self-expression to self-sustainment. From creative choices to business decisions.

The key to navigating this phase of an artistic journey is learning to tune out. To prevent external pressures from entering our inner process and interfering with the pure creative state.

It helps to recall the clear mindset that produced the first work and allowed success to happen originally.

Set aside not just business concerns, but the needs and thoughts of these outside voices. Keep them out of your consciousness while in pursuit of your best work.

When you're able to focus purely on creativity and work in a sacred space, everyone benefits. And all other priorities are served.



At any stage in a career, the critic in your head may make its voice heard. Repeating that 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.

Or there may be a contrary voice that tells you that everything you do is perfect and you will be the greatest phenomenon the world has ever seen.

More often than not, these are outer voices that were absorbed early in life. Perhaps a critical or doting parent, teacher, or mentor. These voices are not our own. We have internalized someone else's judgment. So it can be met with the same indifference as the other random chatter.

Any pressure you feel around the work—from the inside or outside—is a signal for self-examination. The artist's goal is to keep themselves pure and unattached. To avoid letting stress, responsibility, fear, and dependence on a particular outcome distract. And if it does, it's never too late to reset.

The first step of clearing is acknowledgment. Notice yourself feeling the weight of self-criticism or the pressure to live up to expectations. And remember that commercial success is completely out of your control. All that matters is that you are making something you love, to the best of your ability, here and now.

Working to free yourself from inner voices is a kind of meditation. Set aside all concerns for a stretch of time and say, I'm only going to focus on this one practice: making great work.

If any distractions come along during that period, don't ignore them or focus on them. Don't give them any energy at all. Let them pass, like clouds parting around a mountain.

Regularly engaging in this practice builds the muscle of focused intention, which you can use in everything you do. Eventually, tuning out the

undermining voices and losing yourself in the work will not be an effort of will, but an earned ability.

Self-Awareness



As children, few of us are taught to understand and prioritize our feelings. For the most part, the educational system doesn't ask us to access our sensitivity, but to be obedient. To do what is expected. Our natural independent spirit is tamed. Free thought is constrained. There is a set of rules and expectations put upon us that is not about exploring who we are or what we're capable of.

The system is not here for our benefit. It holds us back as individuals to support its own continued existence. This is particularly undermining to independent thinking and free expression. As artists, our mission is not to fit in or conform to popular thinking. Our purpose is to value and develop our understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

To be self-aware is to have the ability to tune in to what we think, how we feel, and how much we feel it without interference. To notice how we notice the outside world.

A well-tuned ability to expand and refine our self-awareness is the key to making revelatory works. Sometimes there are many versions of pretty good. How do we know when we arrive at greatness?

Self-awareness allows us to listen to what's going on in the body, and notice the energetic changes that either pull us forward or push us away. Sometimes they are subtle, other times intense.

Our definition of self-awareness as artists relates directly to the way we tune in to our inner experience, not the way we are externally perceived. The more we identify with our self as it exists through the eyes of others, the more disconnected we become and the less energy we have to draw from.

We extend our reach for a higher consciousness. Releasing attachment to our perceived self and limitations. We are seeking not to define ourselves, but to expand ourselves, to tune in to our limitless nature and connection to all that is.

Self-awareness is a transcendence. An abandonment of ego. A letting go.

This notion may seem elusive, because in the same breath, it includes tuning in to the self and surrendering the self. Yet these are not as contradictory as they may seem. As artists, we are on a continual quest to get closer to the universe by getting closer to self. Moving ever nearer to the point where we can no longer tell where one begins and the other ends. We're on a distant metaphysical journey from the here to the now.

| It's helpful to work as if the project you're engaged in is bigger than you.

Right Before Our Eyes



Artists occasionally experience a sense of stagnation. A block. This isn't because the flow of creativity has stopped. It can't. This generative energy is ceaseless. It may just be that we are choosing not to engage with it.

Think of an artistic impasse as another type of creation. A block of your own making. A decision, conscious or unconscious, not to participate in the stream of productive energy that is available to us at all times.

When we feel constricted, we might begin to create an opening through surrender. If we let go of our analytical thoughts, the flow might be able to find a path through us more easily. We can be and do, rather than think and try. Create in the present, rather than anticipating the future.

Each time we surrender, we may come to find that the answer we seek is right before our eyes. A new idea arises. An object in the room inspires. Feelings in the body amplify.

This is worth considering in difficult moments when we appear to be stuck, to have lost our way, to have nothing left to give.

What if this is all a story?

Be mindful not to abandon a project prematurely because you have given in to all-or-nothing thinking. I have witnessed several artists start projects and throw them away for this very reason. It's easy to create a piece, recognize a flaw, and want to discard the entire work. This reflex happens in all areas of life.

When you look at the work, practice truly seeing what's there, without a negativity bias. Be open to seeing both strength and weakness, instead of

focusing on the weakness and allowing it to overwhelm the strength. You might come to realize 80 percent of the work is quite good, and if the other 20 percent fits in just the right way, the work becomes magnificent. This is far better than trashing the work because one small part isn't a perfect fit. When you acknowledge a weakness, always consider how it could either be removed or improved before discarding the entire piece.

What if the source of creativity is always there, knocking patiently on the doors of our perception, waiting for us to unbolt the locks?

| If you are open and stay tuned
to what's happening,
the answers will be revealed.

A Whisper Out of Time



It is common for an artist to question the weight of their ideas.

A five-year-long creative process might have begun with a fleeting moment in a dream or a remark overheard in a parking lot. In hindsight, this tiny seed that led us down a winding path may seem insignificant. We might wonder if it's big enough or if the direction is important enough to keep traveling.

When gathering seeds to begin our work, we may be tempted to look for a grand sign before committing ourselves. A clap of thunder to assure us that we've found the right path. We may discard ideas that don't seem of great importance or magnitude.

But the size does not matter. Volume does not equal value.

We can't weigh Source material based on the initial impact it makes on arrival. Sometimes the smallest seed grows into the biggest tree. The most innocent idea can lead to the most consequential writing. Trivial insights can open the doors to vast new worlds. The most delicate message could be of the greatest importance.

Even if the seed is nothing more than what we notice—a momentary perception, an unexpected thought, even the echo of a memory—it's enough.

Most often, the hints of inspiration and direction from Source are small. They appear as tiny signals traveling through the void of space, quiet and subtle, like a whisper.



To hear whispers, the mind must also be quiet. We pay close attention on all fronts. Our antennae sensitively tuned.

Boosting our receptivity may require a relaxing of effort. If we're trying to solve a problem, *trying* can get in the way. Splashing in a pond stirs up clouds of dirt in the clear water. In relaxing the mind, we may have greater clarity to hear the whisper when it comes.

In addition to meditation, we might softly hold on to a question and go for a walk, swim, or drive. The question isn't being worked on, just loosely held in awareness. We are posing it gently to the Universe and opening ourselves to receive an answer.

Sometimes the words seem to arise from the outside, and other times, the inside. Whatever route the information arrives through, we allow it to come by grace, not effort. The whisper cannot be wrestled into existence, only welcomed with an open state of mind.

Expect a Surprise



If we're paying attention, we may notice that some of our most interesting artistic choices come about by accident. Springing from moments of communion with the work, when the self disappears. Sometimes they feel like mistakes.

These mistakes are the subconscious engaged in problem-solving. They're a kind of creative Freudian slip, where a deeper part of you overrides your conscious intention and offers an elegant solution. When asked how it happened, you may say that you don't know. It just came through you in the moment.

In time, we grow accustomed to experiencing moments that are difficult to explain. Moments where you give the art exactly what it needs, without intending to, where a solution seems as if it appeared without your intervention at all.

In time, we learn to count on the hand of the unknown.

For some artists, being surprised is a rare experience. But it's possible to cultivate this gift through invitation.

One way is through letting go of control. Release all expectations about what the work will be. Approach the process with humility and the unexpected will visit more often. Many of us are taught to create through sheer will. If we choose surrender, the ideas that want to come through us will not be blocked.

It's similar to writing a book by following a detailed outline. Set aside the outline, write with no map, and see what happens. The premise you start with could develop into something more. Something you couldn't have planned

and would never have arisen if you were locked into following a particular script.

With your intention set, and the destination unknown, you are free to surrender your conscious mind, dive into the raging stream of creative energy, and watch the unexpected appear, again and again.

As each small surprise leads to another, you'll soon find the biggest surprise:

You learn to trust yourself—in the universe, with the universe, as a unique channel to a higher wisdom.

This intelligence is beyond our understanding. Through grace, it is accessible to all.

| Living in discovery is at all times preferable
to living through assumptions.

Great Expectations



When beginning a new project, we're often met with anxiety. It visits almost all of us no matter how experienced, successful, or well-prepared we might be.

In facing the void, there is a tension of opposites. There is an excitement for the possibility something great may be realized and a dread it might not. And the result is out of our control.

The weight of our expectations can grow heavy. As does the fear that we are not up to the task at hand. What if we can't pull it off this time?

What helps to keep these worries at bay and move forward is a trust in the process.

When we sit down to work, remember that the outcome is out of our control. If we are willing to take each step into the unknown with grit and determination, carrying with us all of our collected knowledge, we will ultimately get to where we're going. This destination may not be one we've chosen in advance. It will likely be more interesting.

This isn't a matter of blind belief in yourself. It's a matter of experimental faith.

You work not as an evangelist, expecting miracles, but as a scientist, testing and adjusting and testing again. Experimenting and building on the results. Faith is rewarded, perhaps even more than talent or ability.

After all, how can we offer the art what it needs without blind trust? We are required to believe in something that doesn't exist in order to allow it to come into being.



When we don't yet know where we're going, we don't wait. We move forward in the dark. If nothing we attempt yields progress, we rely on belief and will. We may take several steps backward in the sequence to move ahead.

If we try ten experiments and none of them work, we have a choice. We can take it personally, and think of ourselves as a failure and question our ability to solve the problem. Or we can recognize we've ruled out ten ways that don't work, bringing us that much closer to a solution. For the artist, whose job is testing possibilities, success is as much ruling out a solution as finding one that works.

In the process of experimentation, we allow ourselves to make mistakes, to go too far, to go even further, to be inept. There is no failure, as every step we take is necessary to reach our destination, including the missteps. Each experiment is valuable in its own way if we learn something from it. Even if we can't comprehend its worth, we are still practicing our craft, moving ever so much closer to mastery.

With unshakable faith, we work under the assumption that the problem is already solved. The answer is out there, perhaps it's obvious. We just haven't come across it yet.

Over time, as you complete more projects, this faith in experimentation grows. You're able to hold high expectations, move forward with patience, and trust the mysterious unfolding before you. With the understanding that the process will get you where you're going. Wherever that reveals itself to be. And the magical nature of the unfolding never ceases to take our breath away.

Sometimes the mistakes
are what makes a work great.
Humanity breathes in mistakes.

Openness



Our minds seek rules and limits. In attempting to navigate a large, uncertain world, we develop beliefs that give us a coherent framework, reduced options, and a false sense of certainty.

Before civilization, the natural world was far more dangerous. In order for humans to survive, we had to assess situations and parse information quickly.

This survival instinct persists today. With the overwhelming amount of information available to us, we are more reliant than ever on categorization, labeling, and shortcuts. Few have the time and expertise to evaluate each new choice with a completely open, unbiased mind. There is also a sense of security in shrinking our world to make it more manageable.

The artist does not value safety and smallness. Reducing our palette to fit the perimeter of limited beliefs suppresses the work. New creative possibilities and sources of inspiration are blocked from view. If an artist keeps playing the same note, eventually the audience loses interest.

There's a dullness in sameness. At a certain point in the creator's journey, the mind can become more resistant to new methods or new styles of expression. A once-useful routine might, over time, turn into a narrow, fixed way of working. To break out of this mindset, our charge is to soften, to become more porous, and to let more light in.

To keep the artistic output evolving, continually replenish the vessel from which it comes. And actively stretch your point of view.

Invite beliefs that are different from the ones you hold and try to see beyond your own filter. Purposely experiment past the boundaries of your taste. Examine approaches you may dismiss as too highbrow or lowbrow.

What can we learn from these extremes? What are the unexpected surprises? What closed door might open in your work?

Consider expanding this practice to relationships as well. When a collaborator's feedback or method seems questionable and conflicts with your default setting, reframe this as an exciting opportunity. Do all you can to see from their perspective and understand their point of view, instead of defending your own. In addition to solving the problem at hand, you may uncover something new about yourself and become aware of the limits boxing you in.

The heart of open-mindedness is curiosity. Curiosity doesn't take sides or insist on a single way of doing things. It explores all perspectives. Always open to new ways, always seeking to arrive at original insights. Craving constant expansion, it looks upon the outer limits of the mind with wonder. It pushes to expose falsely set boundaries and break through to new frontiers.



When we encounter an artistic problem, the reason it's a problem is typically because it conflicts with our accepted beliefs of what is and isn't possible. Or our expectations for what is expected to happen.

A song may begin to veer away from our assumed genre. A painter might run out of a certain type of paint. A film director might experience a malfunction with a piece of equipment on set.

When something doesn't go according to plan, we have a choice to either resist it or incorporate it.

Instead of shutting the project down or expressing frustration, we might consider what else can be done with the materials at hand. What solutions can be improvised? How can the flow be redirected?

There may be a beneficial purpose behind the issue at hand. The universe could be leading us to an even better solution.

There's no way to know.

We can only flow with the challenges as they come and keep an open mind, with no baggage, no previous story to live up to. We simply begin from

a neutral place, allow the process to unfold, and welcome the winds of change to guide the way.

Many people may seem walled off.
But sometimes walls can provide
different ways of seeing
over and around obstacles.

Surrounding the Lightning Bolt



An explosion of information arrives in inspired moments. How can we avoid becoming fixated on these bolts of lightning? Some artists live as storm chasers awaiting spontaneous strikes, longing for the thrill.

A more constructive strategy is to focus less on the lightning bolt and **more on the spaces surrounding it. The space before,** because lightning does not strike unless **the right preconditions are met,** **and the space after,** because the electricity dissipates if you do not capture it and use it. When we are struck by an epiphany, our experience of what's possible has been expanded. In that instant, we are broken open. We've entered a new reality. Even when we leave that heightened state, the experience sometimes remains in us. Other times it's fleeting.

If lightning should strike, and this information is channeled through the aether to us, what follows is a great deal of practical work. While we can't command a lightning bolt's arrival, we can control the space around it. We accomplish this by preparing beforehand and honoring our obligation to it afterward.

If lightning doesn't strike, our work need not be delayed. Some storm chasers believe that inspiration precedes creation. This is not always the case. Working without lightning bolts is simply working. Like carpenters, we show up each day and do our job. Sculptors knead clay, sweep the studio floor, and lock up for the night. Graphic designers sit at their workstations, select images, choose fonts, create layouts, and hit *save*.

Artists are ultimately craftspeople. Sometimes our ideas come through bolts of lightning. Other times only through effort, experiment, and craft. As

we work, we may notice connections and become surprised by the wonder of what's revealed through the doing itself. In a way, these small a-ha! moments are also bolts of lightning. Less vivid, they still illuminate our way.



A lightning bolt may just be a temporary phenomenon, a momentary expression of cosmic potential. Not every inspired idea is destined to become a great work of art. Sometimes lightning arrives and we have no use for it. A moment of inspiration may excite us to begin a long exploration to discover its practical form, only to arrive at a dead end.

The only way to find out is to engage wholeheartedly in the work. Without diligence, inspiration alone rarely yields work of much consequence. In some projects, inspiration can be minimal and effort takes over. In others, inspiration can strike and the effort needed to manifest its potential can't be summoned.

Making great art may not always require great effort, but without it, you'll never know. If inspiration calls, we ride the lightning until the energy is exhausted.

The ride may not last long. But we are grateful for the opportunity. If inspiration does not come to lead the way, we show up anyway.

Do what you can
with what you have.
Nothing more is needed.