importance. The purpose is to set up a structure to go beyond your usual method and find new ways forward.

Completion

As the work improves through the Craft phase, you'll come to the point where all of the options available to you have been explored sufficiently.

The seed has achieved its full expression and you've pruned it to your satisfaction. Nothing is left to add or take away. The work's essence rings clear. There's a sense of fulfillment in these moments.

From here, we advance into the final movement of the creative process.

In the Completion phase, we leave behind discovery and building. With a beautiful volume of material crafted before us, the final form is refined to be released into the world.

The finishing touches and fine-tuning are different for every project. They may be as simple as putting a frame on a painting, color correcting a film, tweaking a song's final mix, or rereading a manuscript to make sure the phrasing is just right.

As with the other stages of the creative act, the Completion phase isn't a clear line you cross in a forward journey. In the process of preparing your work to share, you may realize there's more to be done. A revision, an addition, a deletion, or some other change may be called for. So you step back to Craft or Experiment, and work your way forward once more.

We can think of the Completion phase as the last stop on an assembly line. The finished piece is examined to ensure it meets your highest standards. If it doesn't meet them, you send it back to be improved. Once it does, you sign off on it, let it go, and begin the next chapter of your life's work—whatever that may be.

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Once you feel a project is close to completion, it can be helpful to open the work to other perspectives.

The primary aim is not to receive notes or opinions. This is your work, your expression. You are the only audience that matters. The intention is for you to experience the work anew.

When playing music for someone else, we hear it differently than when we listen to it ourselves. It's as if borrowing a second set of ears. We're not necessarily looking for an outside perspective. We are more interested in widening our own.

If we write an essay and give it to a friend, before even hearing their perspective, our relationship to the work changes. Give it to a mentor and our perspective shifts in a different way. We interrogate ourselves when we offer our work up to others. We ask the questions we didn't ask ourselves when we were making it. Sharing it in this limited capacity brings our underlying doubts to light.

If someone chooses to share feedback, listen to understand the person, not the work. People will tell you more about themselves than about the art when giving feedback. We each see a unique world.

Occasionally, a comment will strike home. It will resonate with something we feel, either in our awareness or just behind it, and we may discover room for improvement. Other times, a judgment will hit a nerve, and we find ourselves defending the work or losing faith.

In these moments, it may be helpful to step away, reset, and return with a neutral mind. Criticism allows us to engage with our work in a new way. We may agree or we may double down on our original instincts.

Sometimes a challenge allows us to focus on an aspect of the work and realize it's more important than we previously thought. In the process, we access deeper wells of understanding into the work and ourselves.

As you collect feedback, the solutions offered may not always seem helpful. Before discarding them, take a moment to see if they're pointing to an underlying problem you hadn't noticed.

For example, if there's a suggestion to remove the bridge of a song, you might interpret that as "it's worth reexamining the bridge." And then set about looking at it in the context of the entire piece.

If you've truly created an innovative work, it's likely to alienate as many people as it attracts. The best art divides the audience. If everyone likes it, you probably haven't gone far enough.

In the end, you are the only one who has to love it. This work is for you.

When is the work done?

There is no formula or method for finding this answer. It is an intuition:

The work is done when you feel it is.

Although we avoid deadlines early in the process, in the Completion phase, a due date could help bring time into focus and support you in completing the work.

Art doesn't get made on the clock. But it can get finished on the clock.

Some find this phase to be the most difficult part of the process. They resist letting go with a stubborn ferocity. Up until this point, the clay is still soft. Everything can change. Once fixed, we lose control. This fear of permanence is common beyond art. It is known as commitment phobia.

When the last chapter is about to end, we may create excuses to put off the completion of the work.

It can be a sudden loss of faith in the project. Deciding it's no longer good enough. We find flaws that don't really exist. We make inconsequential changes. We sense the distant mirage of some better creative option that hasn't been discovered yet. And if only we just keep working, it might arrive someday.

When you believe the work before you is the single piece that will forever define you, it's difficult to let it go. The urge for perfection is overwhelming.

It’s too much. We are frozen, and sometimes end up convincing ourselves that discarding the entire work is the only way to move forward.

The only art the world gets to enjoy is from creators who’ve overcome these hurdles and released their work. Perhaps still greater artists existed than the ones we know, but they were never able to make this leap.

Releasing a work into the world becomes easier when we remember that each piece can never be a total reflection of us, only a reflection of who we are in this moment. If we wait, it’s no longer today’s reflection. In a year, we may be guided to create a piece that looks nothing like it. There is a timeliness to the work. The passing of seasons could dissipate the value the work holds for us.

Hanging on to your work is like spending years writing the same entry in a diary. Moments and opportunities are lost. The next works are robbed of being brought to life.

How many pages will be left empty because your process was dampened by doubt and deliberation? Keep this question in the front of your mind. It might allow you to move forward more freely.

In an environment where nothing is permanent, we produce static artifacts. Mementos of spirit. We hope they’ll live forever, holding resonance through each passing decade. Some might, many won’t. It’s impossible to know. We can only keep building.

When you and the work are in sync, there’s a time to put it out and move on.

Each new project is another opportunity to communicate what’s coming through you. It’s another chance at bat. Another opportunity to connect. Another page filled in the diary of your inner life.

Concerns about releasing a work into the world may be rooted in deeper anxieties. It could be a fear of being judged, misunderstood, ignored, or disliked. Will more ideas come? Will they ever be this good again?

Will anyone even care?

Part of the process of letting go is releasing any thoughts of how you or your piece will be received. When making art, the audience comes last. Let's not consider how a piece will be received or our release strategy until the work is finished and we love it.

This is different from a work being perfect. We can engage with any of the works we've been a part of and recognize things wrong with them. Maybe we didn't in the moment we finished them, but when looking back we often do. There are forever changes to be made. There is no right version. Every work of art is simply an iteration.

One of the greatest rewards of making art is our ability to share it. Even if there is no audience to receive it, we build the muscle of making something and putting it out into the world. Finishing our work is a good habit to develop. It boosts confidence. Despite our insecurities, the more times we can bring ourselves to release our work, the less weight insecurity has.

Avoid overthinking. When you're happy with the work and you're moved to share it with a friend, it might be time to share it with the world as well.

This final phase is a fertile time to plant a new crop of seeds. The excitement of what's coming next can generate the vital energy needed to bring the current work to its close. You may find it a struggle to keep yourself focused on the project at hand when new ideas start coming at you. This is a good problem to have. Riding the life force of the project to come often breaks us out of the trance of the present piece. We can't wait to finish, because there's another idea calling that lights us up.

> Is it time for the next project
> because the clock or calendar
> says it’s time,
> or because the work itself
> says it’s time?

The Abundant Mindset

A river of material flows through us. When we share our works and our ideas, they are replenished. If we block the flow by holding them all inside, the river cannot run and new ideas are slow to appear.

In the abundant mindset, the river never runs dry. Ideas are always coming through. And an artist is free to release them with the faith that more will arrive.

If we live in a mindset of scarcity, we hoard great ideas. A comedian may be presented with a perfect opportunity to tell a favorite new joke they've written, but instead will hold it back waiting for a more high-profile occasion. When we use our material, new content comes through. And the more we share, the more our skills improve.

Choosing to live in scarcity leads to stagnation. If we work on one project forever, we never get to make another. The fear of drought and the impulse for perfectionism prevent us from moving on and block the river's flow.

Each mindset evokes a universal rule: whatever we concentrate on, we get.

If the mind creates a world that is limited, where we think we don't have enough worthwhile ideas or material, we will not see the inspiration the universe is providing.

And the river slows.

In the abundant world, we have a greater capacity to complete and release our work. When there are so many ideas available and so much great art to make, we are compelled to engage, let go, and move forward.

If there is only one work to do, and we intend to retire when it's done, there is no impetus to finish. If each piece is approached as our life's defining work, we revise and overwrite endlessly, aiming for the unrealistic ideal of perfection.

A musician may delay releasing an album for fear they haven't taken the songs as far as they can go. Yet an album is only a diary entry of a moment of time, a snapshot reflection of who the artist is for that period. And no one diary entry is our life story.

Our life's work is far greater than any individual container. The works we do are at most chapters. There will always be a new chapter, and another after that. Though some might be better than others, that is not our concern. Our objective is to be free to close one chapter and move on to the next, and to continue that process for as long as it pleases us.

Your old work isn't better than your new work. And your new work isn't better than the old. There will be highs and lows throughout an artist's life. To assume there was a golden period and you're past it is only true if you accept that premise. Putting your best effort in at each moment, in each chapter, is all we can ever hope to accomplish.

There is always more we can improve or another version to be made. We could work on something for another two years, and it will be different. But there's no way to know if it will be better or worse—only different. Just as you will be. And you may have evolved past the work you spent years laboring on. The direct reflection of you has faded. The work begins to look like an old photo instead of a mirror image. It's dispiriting to complete and share a work you've lost connection with.

The recognition of abundance fills us with hope that our brightest ideas still await us and our greatest work is yet to come. We are able to live in an energized state of creative momentum, free to make things, let them go, make the next thing, and let it go. With each chapter we make, we gain experience, improve at our craft, and inch closer to who we are.

The Experimenter and the Finisher

In their nature, many artists lean toward one of two categories: Experimenters or Finishers.

Experimenters are partial to dreaming and play, finding it more difficult to complete and release their work.

Finishers are the mirror image, a backward reflection. They move quickly to the end point with immediate clarity. They are less interested in exploring the possibilities and alternatives that the Experimentation and Craft phases can suggest.

Each might find it helpful to borrow from the other.

Finishers might benefit from taking more time in the early phases. Writing beyond the minimum requirement, experimenting with other materials, considerations, and perspectives. Allowing themselves space for improvisation and surprise in the process.

Experimenters might benefit from taking an aspect of the work through to completion. It might be a drawing, a song,or the chapter of a book. Even making one foundational decision from which to build can help.

Take the example of an album. If you're a musician struggling with ten songs, narrow your focus to two. When we make the task more manageable and focused, a change occurs. And completing even a small segment builds confidence.

Going from two to three is easier than going from zero to two. And if you happen to get stuck on three, then skip it and get four and five done.

Complete as many elements of the project as you can without getting hung up. It's much easier to circle back once the workload is reduced. Often

the knowledge we gain from finishing the other pieces becomes a key to overcoming earlier obstacles.

Temporary Rules

Much of the artistic process involves ignoring rules, letting go of rules, undermining rules, and rooting out rules that we didn't know we were following. There is also a place for imposing rules. For using rules as a tool to define a given project.

When there are no material, time, and budget constraints, you have unlimited options. When you accept limitations, your range of choices is reduced. Whether imposed by design or by necessity, it's helpful to see limitations as opportunities.

Think of this as setting a palette for each project. Within these constraints, the problem-solving aspects become more specific, and the most obvious solutions may not be available. This culling can help give new work its character and set it apart from past efforts, with potential for groundbreaking results. Novel problems lead to original solutions.

Georges Perec wrote an entire book without using the most common letter of the French alphabet: *e*. It went on to become one of the most celebrated experimental works in modern literature.

The painter Yves Klein decided to limit his palette to one color. This led him to discover a shade of blue no one had ever seen before. The shade itself was seen by many as effectively becoming the art, and was later named "International Klein Blue."

The director Lars von Trier came up with ten rules, Dogme 95 The Vow of Chastity, designed to reduce the artificiality of filmmaking. They were as follows:

1. **Shooting must be performed on location, without providing props or sets that don't logically exist within that setting.**
2. **Diegetic sound only. Sounds must never be produced, such as music that does not exist within the scene.**
3. **All shots must be handheld. Movement, immobility, and stability must be attained by hand.**
4. **The film must be in color, with no special lighting. If there's not enough exposure, a single lamp may be attached to the camera.**
5. **There can be no optical work or lens filters.**
6. **No 'superficial' action (such as staged murders, elaborate stunts, etc.).**
7. **Geographical alienation is strictly forbidden, meaning the film must take place here and now.**
8. **No genre movies.**
9. **Academy 35mm is the only accepted film format.**
10. **Directors must not be credited.**

Three years after the manifest's announcement, the first official Dogme 95 film was released by Thomas Vinterberg. Titled *The Celebration (Festen)*, the film was an instant critical success, winning the Jury Prize at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival.

Inspired by Von Trier, the keyboardist Money Mark made a similar set of rules, applicable to music, to record one of his most highly regarded albums.

The rules of baseball or basketball define the game and are rarely altered. Innovation exists only within those rules. As artists, we get to create a new set of rules each and every time we play. After careful consideration, we may choose to break them in the midst of a project if a discovery impels us. While it's easy to make these changes, there's little use to rules if they are not taken seriously.

There are no bad rules or good rules. Only rules that fit the situation and serve the art, or those that don't. If the goal is to create the most beautiful work possible, then whatever directives are truly in service to that end are the right ones to use.

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The imposition of rules is most valuable for an artist who has already made some work. If you're established in a craft or field, temporary rules may be useful to break a pattern. They can challenge you to become better, to innovate, and to bring out a new side of yourself or your work.

Some virtuoso artists choose to switch to less familiar instruments or mediums, because the challenge reveals them as the artist they truly are, without the distraction of their technical skill.

Set parameters that force you out of your comfort zone. If you always write on a laptop, try using a yellow legal pad. If you're right-handed, paint using your left hand. If you base your melodies on instrumentals, write one acappella. If you film using professional equipment, consider making an entire movie with only the camera in your phone. If you always prepare for acting roles through research, try a blind improvisation.

Whatever you choose, decide on a framework that breaks your normal rhythm and see where it leads. Just by the nature of the limitations you set, the work will be different from what you've done before. It is of little importance whether it's better. The purpose is self-discovery.

If you typically write short paragraphs, you may decide to experiment with long paragraphs. You may not like the new form as much, but you'll probably learn something in the process that will improve the short paragraphs. By breaking the rules, you'll come to have a greater understanding of your past choices.

An issue for some successful artists when considering changes in style or method is concern for their following. They ask: *Will the audience come along for the ride?*

In exploring new horizons, you may very well lose some fans. New fans may also appear. Whatever the case, the decision to limit your work to the familiar is a disservice to both yourself and your audience. The energy of wonder and discovery can get lost when treading the same ground over and over again.

A rule is a way of structuring awareness.

Greatness

Imagine going to live on a mountaintop by yourself, forever. You build a home that no one will ever visit. Still, you invest the time and effort to shape the space in which you'll spend your days.

The wood, the plates, the pillows—all magnificent. Curated to your taste.

This is the essence of great art. We make it for no other purpose than creating our version of the beautiful, bringing all of ourself to every project, whatever its parameters and constraints. Consider it an offering, a devotional act. We do the best, as we see the best—with our own taste. No one else's.

We create our art so we may inhabit it ourselves.

Measurement of greatness is subjective, like art itself. There is no hard metric. We are performing for an audience of one.

If you think, "I don't like it but someone else will," you are not making art for yourself. You've found yourself in the business of commerce, which is fine; it just may not be art. There's no bright line between the two. The more formulaic your creation is, the more it hugs the shore of what's been popular, the less like art it's likely to be. And in fact, creativity in that spirit often fails even at its own goals. There is no more valid metric to predict what someone else might enjoy than us liking it ourselves.

Fear of criticism. Attachment to a commercial result. Competing with past work. Time and resource constraints. The aspiration of wanting to change the world. And any story beyond "I want to make the best thing I can make, whatever it is" are all undermining forces in the quest for greatness.

Instead of focusing on what making this will bring you, focus on what you contribute to this art to make it the best it could possibly be, with no

limitation.

If you're creating something with a solely functional purpose, such as a car designed to reach a certain top speed, other intentions may matter. If your project is purely artistic, then redirect your inner voice to focus on pure creative intent.

With the objective of simply doing great work, a ripple effect occurs. A bar is set for everything you do, which may not only lift your work to new heights, but raise the vibration of your entire life. It may even inspire others to do their best work. Greatness begets greatness. It's infectious.

Success

How shall we measure success?

It isn't popularity, money, or critical esteem. Success occurs in the privacy of the soul. It comes in the moment you decide to release the work, before exposure to a single opinion. When you've done all you can to bring out the work's greatest potential. When you're pleased and ready to let go.

Success has nothing to do with variables outside yourself.

To move forward is an aspect of success. This happens when we finish a work, share it, and begin a new project.

Whatever comes after this quiet feeling of accomplishment is subject to market conditions. Conditions beyond us. Our calling is to make beautiful works to the best of our ability. Sometimes they will be applauded or rewarded, sometimes not. If we second-guess our inner knowing to attempt to predict what others may like, our best work will never appear.

Popular success is a poor barometer of work and worth. In order for a work to connect commercially, stars must align and none of them relate to how good the project is. It might be the timing, the distribution mechanism, the mood of the culture, or a connection to current events.

If a global catastrophe happens on the same day a project comes out, the project might be overshadowed. If you've made a stylistic change, your fans may not initially be receptive to it. If a highly anticipated work by another

artist is released on the same day, your project may not land with the same impact. Most variables are completely out of our control. The only ones we can control are doing our best work, sharing it, starting the next, and not looking back.

It's not uncommon to long for outward success, hopeful it will fill a void inside ourselves. Some imagine achievement as a remedy to fix or heal a sense of not being enough.

Artists who work diligently to accomplish this are rarely prepared for the reality of it. Most aspects of popularity are not as advertised. And the artist is often just as empty as they were before, probably more so.

If you are living in the belief that success will cure your pain, when the treatment comes and doesn't work, it can lead to hopelessness. A depression can accompany the realization that what you've spent most of your life chasing hasn't fixed your insecurities and vulnerabilities. More likely, with the stakes and consequences now higher, it has only amplified the pressure. And we are never taught how to handle this epic disappointment.

A loyal audience can begin to feel like a prison. A musician might begin working in a particular genre because it's the one they love, and might achieve great success with it. If their taste changes, they may feel chained to the old way, because there are now managers, publicists, agents, assistants, and others who have a stake in their commercial success. On a personal level, they may even tie their own identity to the style of work they've inhabited in the past.

Whenever an instinct toward movement and evolution arises, it's wise to listen to it. The alternative—being trapped by a fear of losing ground—is a dead end. You may lose your enjoyment and belief in the work because it's no longer true to you. As a result, the work may ring hollow and fail to engage the audience anyway.

Consider that it might not have been your initial style that attracted success, but your personal passion within it. So if your passion changes

course, follow it. Your trust in your instincts and excitement are what resonate with others.

The same outcome can be viewed as a great success or a terrible failure, depending on the perspective. This perception can have a momentum that's carried forth through the writer's career. Being labeled a failure with a work that was successful by most other metrics can make moving forward that much more difficult to navigate.

This is why it's grounding to protect your personal understanding of success. And to make each new work, no matter where you stand on the ladder of public perception, like you have nothing to lose.

> If we can tune in to the idea
> of making things and sharing them
> without being attached to the outcome,
> the work is more likely
> to arrive in its truest form.

Connected Detachment

(Possibility)

Consider detaching from the story of your life as it's happening.

The manuscript of the novel you've worked on for years is lost in a fire. Your romantic relationship breaks up when you thought it was going well. You lose a job you care about. As hard as it may seem, seek to experience events like these as if you're watching a movie. You're observing a dramatic scene where the protagonist faces a seemingly insurmountable challenge.

It's you, but it's not you.

Instead of sinking into the pain of heartbreak or the stress of being laid off or the grief of loss, if practicing detachment the response might be: *I wasn't expecting that plot twist. I wonder what's going to happen to our hero next.*

There's always a next scene, and that next scene may be one of great beauty and fulfillment. The hard times were the required setup to allow these new possibilities to come into being.

The outcome is not the outcome. The darkness is not an end point, nor is the daylight. They live in a continually unfolding, mutually dependent cycle. Neither is bad or good. They simply exist.

This practice—of never assuming an experience you have is the whole story—will support you in a life of open possibility and equanimity. When we obsessively focus on these events, they may appear catastrophic. But they're just a small aspect of a larger life, and the further you zoom back, the smaller each experience becomes.

Zoom in and obsess. Zoom out and observe. We get to choose.

When we reach an impasse, we may experience feelings of hopelessness. The ability to stay out of the story, zoom back, and see new pathways into and around a challenge will be of boundless use.

If we allow this principle to work on us as we work on it, our imagination frees us from the web of personal and cultural stories engulfing us. Art has the power to snap us out of our transfixion, open our minds to what's possible, and reconnect with the eternal energy that moves through all things.

The Ecstatic

Have you ever felt pulled in, as if entranced, while listening to a piece of music? How about while reading a book or gazing at a painting?

This may be one of the reasons you're drawn to creative work to begin with—the memory, the recurring experience, of sensory joy. It's like biting into a piece of fruit at the peak of its ripeness.

Now think of everything held in a work that comes before the moment of perfect balance. All the experiments that miss the mark. The ideas that go nowhere. The difficult decisions that are made. The tiny adjustments that seem to change everything.

What is the test an artist uses in those crucial moments during the process? How do you know when the work—and the working—is good? How can you tell when you're moving in the right direction? What does forward motion look like?

You could say it's a feeling. An inner voice. A silent whisper that makes you laugh. An energy that enters the room and possesses the body. Call it joy, awe, or elation. When a sense of harmony and fulfillment suddenly prevails.

It is an arising of the ecstatic.

The ecstatic is our compass, pointing to our true north. It arises genuinely in the process of creation. You're working and struggling, and suddenly you notice a shift. A revelation. A small tweak is made, a new angle is revealed, and it takes your breath away.

It can arise from even the most seemingly mundane detail. The change of a word in a sentence. Instantly, the passage morphs from nonsense to poetry, and everything falls into place.

An artist will be in the throes of creation, and the work may seem unremarkable for a while. Suddenly, a shift occurs or a moment is revealed, and the same piece now seems extraordinary.

So little was needed to make the leap from mediocrity to greatness. The leap can't always be understood, but when it happens, it's clear and enlivening.

This can occur at any point during a project. You may be moving along in the neutral zone for some time. You hit a new note, and suddenly you feel magnetized. You're engaged. You lean forward and feel a rush of energy, like an answered prayer.

This feeling is the affirmation that you're on the right path. It is a nudge to keep going. A sign that you're working in the direction of greatness, that there is deeper truth in what you're doing. It's grounded in something worthy.

This epiphany is the heart of creativity. It's something we feel in our whole body. It causes us to snap to attention and quicken our heartbeat, or to laugh in surprise. It gives us a glimpse of a higher ideal, opening new possibilities in us that we didn't know were there. It is so invigorating that it makes all of the laborious, less interesting parts of the work worth doing.

We are mining for these events: the moments when the dots connect. We revel in the satisfaction of seeing the whole shape come into clear focus.

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The nature of the ecstatic is animalistic. A visceral, body-centered reaction, not a cerebral one. It doesn't have to make sense. It is not meant to be understood. It is there to guide us.

The intellect may help complete the work, and it may decipher what is driving our delight in hindsight, but the making of art depends on getting out of our heads. Part of the beauty of creation is that we can surprise ourselves, and make something greater than we're capable of understanding at the time, if we ever can.

Latent ideas and emotions hiding in deeper layers of the psyche may find their way into our lyrics, scenes, and canvases. Many artists come to realize long after their work is released that it was actually a shockingly vulnerable and cryptic form of public confession. A part of themselves was trying to find resolution or to find a voice.

The depth of our work doesn't necessarily matter. Though when you follow your instinctual bodily reactions, you'll often arrive at more profound places than you otherwise would.

The ecstatic can be experienced in different ways. At times, it's a sense of relaxed excitement, like when you're asked a question that you don't think you know the answer to yet you find yourself responding perfectly from a deeper sense of knowing. A rising of energy in the body may create a calm, invigorating confidence.

Other times, it is a moment of astonishment, when you feel emotions so powerful that you can't believe they're happening. They jolt your reality and push you into a sense of disbelief. Like realizing you're driving into oncoming traffic.

Then there's a third kind, where you're gently transported out of reality, without knowing it. While listening to a song, you may find yourself closing your eyes and being taken somewhere. When it ends, you're almost bewildered to find yourself back in your body. As if awakening from a spontaneous dream.

Tune in to these feelings in your creative work. Look for the reactions within. Of all the experiences that occur during the creative process, touching the ecstatic and allowing it to guide our hand are the most profound and precious.

Point of Reference

Every so often, you hear a new recording by an artist you've been following for a period of time who's breaking strange new ground.

It feels odd to hear the work at first. It seems unfamiliar. You have no context for it. You may not be sure you like it. You may even reject it.

Still you're compelled to listen again and again. A new pattern begins to emerge in your brain. What was strange becomes a little more familiar. You start to see how it connects to what came before. It begins to click in your mind, whether you like it or not.

And then one day you realize you can't live without it.

When a beloved artist thwarts our expectations or a new artist defies known precedents, it can be confusing. Initially, the work may feel unsatisfying or of no interest whatsoever. Once we get over the hump of adapting ourselves to the new palette, these can end up being our favorite works. Conversely, works we like immediately might not have that same power down the road.

The very same phenomenon can happen while making our own work.

If you're looking for solutions to a problem, or a new project to begin, you may react in a strongly negative way to an option that springs forth. This can be when the idea is so new that you don't have any context for it. When we don't have context, new ideas appear foreign or awkward.

Sometimes the ideas that least match our expectations are the most innovative. By definition, revolutionary ideas have no context. They invent their own.

When we initially experience the radically new, our first instinct might be to push it away and think, *this isn't for me*. And sometimes it may not be. Other times it could lead to our most enduring, important work.

Be aware of strong responses. If you're immediately turned off by an experience, it's worth examining why. Powerful reactions often indicate deeper wells of meaning. And perhaps by exploring them, you'll be led to the next step on your creative path.

Non-Competition

Art is about the maker.

Its aim: to be an expression of who we are.

This makes competition absurd. Every artist's playing field is specific to them. You are creating the work that best represents you. Another artist is making the work that best represents them. The two cannot be measured against one another. Art relates to the artist making it, and the unique contribution they are bringing to the culture.

Some may argue that competition inspires greatness. The challenge of exceeding what others have accomplished can act as an incentive to push our creative limits. In most cases, though, this energy of competition oscillates at a lower vibration.

Wanting to outperform another artist or make a work better than theirs rarely results in true greatness. Nor is it a mindset that has a healthy impact on the rest of our lives. As Theodore Roosevelt pointed out, comparison is the thief of joy. Besides, why would we want to create with the purpose of diminishing someone else?

When another great work inspires us to elevate our own, however, the energy is different. Seeing the bar raised in our field can encourage us to reach even higher. This energy of rising-to-meet is quite different from that of conquering.

When Brian Wilson first heard the Beatles' *Rubber Soul*, his mind was blown. "If I ever do anything in my life, I'm going to make that good an album," he thought at the time. He went on to explain, "I was so happy to hear it that I went and started writing 'God Only Knows.' "

Being made happy by someone else's best work, and then letting it inspire you to rise to the occasion, is not competition. It's collaboration.

When Paul McCartney heard the resulting Beach Boys album, *Pet Sounds*, he too was blown away and reduced to tears, proclaiming "God Only Knows" was to his ears the best song ever written. Buoyed by the experience, the Beatles played *Pet Sounds* over and over while creating another masterpiece, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. "Without *Pet Sounds*, *Sgt. Pepper* never would have happened," Beatles producer George Martin said. "*Pepper* was an attempt to equal *Pet Sounds*."

This creative back-and-forth wasn't based on commercial competition, it was based on mutual love. And we are all the beneficiaries of this upward spiral toward magnificence.

No system exists that can rank which work is most reflective of the maker. Great art is an invitation, calling to creators everywhere to strive for still higher and deeper levels.

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There is another type of competitiveness that might be seen as an infinite gain: a story that can continue to unfold over the course of an artist's life. This is the competition with the self.

Think of self-competition as a quest for evolution. The object is not to beat our other work. It's to move things forward and create a sense of progression. Growth over superiority.

Our ability and taste may evolve, yielding different works over time, but none can be evaluated as more or less than another. They are different snapshots of who we are, and who we were. They are all our best work in the moment they were created.

With each new project, we are challenging ourselves to most beautifully reflect what's living in us at that particular window of time.

In this spirit of self-competition, task yourself to go further and push into the unexpected. Don't stop even at greatness. Venture beyond.