

Though the artist may have a number of goals and motivations, there is only one intention. This is the grand gesture of the work. ¹

It is not an exercise of thought, a goal to be set, or a means of commodification. **It is a truth that lives inside you.** Through your living it, that truth becomes embedded in the work. If the work doesn't represent who you are and what you're living, how can it hold an energetic charge? ²

An intention is more than a conscious purpose, it's the congruence of that purpose. **It requires an alignment of all aspects of one's self. Of conscious thought and unconscious beliefs,** of capabilities and commitment, of actions when working and not. It's a state of living in harmonic agreement with oneself. ³

Not all projects take time, but they do take a lifetime. In calligraphy, the work is created in one movement of the brush. All the intention is in that single concentrated movement. The line is a reflection of the energy transfer from the artist's being, including the entire history of their experiences, thoughts, and apprehensions, into the hand. The creative energy exists in the journey to the making, not in the act of constructing. ⁴



Our work embodies a higher purpose. Whether we know it or not, we're a conduit for the universe. Material is allowed through us. If we are a clear channel, our intention reflects the intention of the cosmos. ⁵

Most creators think of themselves as the conductor of the orchestra. If we zoom out of our small view of reality, we function more as an instrumentalist in a much larger symphony the universe is orchestrating. ⁶

We may not have a great understanding of what this magnum opus is because we only see the small part we play. ⁷

The bee, attracted by the scent of the flower, lands on one then another, inadvertently enabling reproduction. Should the bee go extinct, not just flowers but birds, small mammals, and humans would likely also cease to exist. It's fair to assume that the bee doesn't know its role in this ⁸

interconnected puzzle and in preserving the balance of nature. The bee is simply being. ¹

Similarly, the total output of human creativity, in all its kaleidoscopic breadth, pieces together the fabric forming our culture. The underlying intention of our work is the aspect allowing it to fit neatly into this fabric. Rarely if ever do we know the grand intention, yet if we surrender to the creative impulse, our singular piece of the puzzle takes its proper shape. ²

Intention is all there is. The work is just a reminder. ³

Rules¹



A rule is any guiding principle or creative criterion. It might exist within the artist, the genre, or the culture. Rules, by their nature, are limitations.²

The laws of math and science are different from the rules we are looking at here. Those laws describe precise relationships in the physical world, which we know to be true by testing them against the world itself.³

The rules artists learn are different. They are assumptions, not absolutes.⁴ They describe a goal or method for short-term or long-term results. They are there to be tested. And they are only of value as long as they are helpful. They are not laws of nature.

All kinds of assumptions masquerade as laws: a suggestion from a self-help book, something heard in an interview, your favorite artist's best tip, an expression in the culture, or something a teacher once told you.⁵

Rules direct us to average behaviors. If we're aiming to create works that are exceptional, most rules don't apply. Average is nothing to aspire to.⁶

The goal is not to fit in. If anything, it's to amplify the differences, what doesn't fit, the special characteristics unique to how you see the world.⁷

Instead of sounding like others, value your own voice. Develop it. Cherish it.⁸

As soon as a convention is established, the most interesting work would likely be the one that doesn't follow it. The reason to make art is to innovate and self-express, show something new, share what's inside, and communicate your singular perspective.⁹



Pressures and expectations come from different directions. Society's mores dictate what's right and wrong, what's accepted and frowned upon, what's celebrated and reviled.

The artists who define each generation are generally the ones who live outside of these boundaries. Not the artists who embody the beliefs and conventions of their time, but the ones who transcend them. Art is confrontation. It widens the audience's reality, allowing them to glimpse life through a different window. One with the potential for a glorious new view.

In the beginning, we approach our craft with a template of what's come before. If you're writing a song, you might think it should be three to five minutes long and have a certain amount of repetition.

To a bird, a song is a very different thing. The bird doesn't prefer a three-to-five-minute format or accept the chorus as the hook, yet the song for the bird is just as sonorous. And even more intrinsic to the bird's being. It's an invitation, a warning, a way to connect, a means of survival.

It's a healthy practice to approach our work with as few accepted rules, starting points, and limitations as possible. Often the standards in our chosen medium are so ubiquitous, we take them for granted. They are invisible and unquestioned. This makes it nearly impossible to think outside the standard paradigm.

Visit an art museum. Most of the paintings you'll see are canvas stretched over a rectangular frame made of wood, whether it's Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Socrates* or the Altarpiece paintings of Hilma af Klint. The content may vary yet the materials are consistent. There's a generally accepted standard.

If you want to paint, you're likely to begin by stretching canvas over a rectangular wooden frame and propping it up on an easel. Based solely on the tools selected, you've already exponentially narrowed what's possible, before a single drop of paint has made contact with the canvas.

We assume the equipment and format are part of the art form itself. Yet painting can be anything that involves the use of color on a surface for an aesthetic or communicative purpose. All other decisions are up to the artist.

Similar conventions are woven into most art forms: a book is a certain number of pages and is divided into chapters. A feature film is 90 to 120 minutes and often has three acts. Embedded in each medium, there are sets of norms that restrain our work before we've even begun.

Genres, in particular, come with distinct variations on rules. A horror film, a ballet, or a country album—each come with specific expectations. As soon as you use a label to describe what you're working on, there's a temptation to conform to its rules.

The templates of the past can be an inspiration in the beginning phases, but it's helpful to think beyond what's been done before. The world isn't waiting for more of the same.

Often, the most innovative ideas come from those who master the rules to such a degree that they can see past them or from those who never learned them at all.



The most deceptive rules are not the ones we can see, but the ones we can't. These can be found hiding deeper in the mind, often unnoticed, just beyond our awareness. Rules that entered our thinking through childhood programming, lessons we've forgotten, osmosis from the culture, and emulating the artists who inspired us to try it for ourselves.

These rules can serve or limit us. Be aware of any assumptions based on conventional wisdom.

Rules obeyed unconsciously are far stronger than the ones set on purpose. And they are more likely to undermine the work.



Every innovation risks becoming a rule. And innovation risks becoming an end in itself.

When we make a discovery that serves our work, it's not unusual to concretize this into a formula. On occasion, we decide this formula is who we

are as an artist. What our voice is and isn't. ¹

While this may benefit certain makers, it can be a limitation for others. ²
Sometimes a formula has diminishing returns. Other times, we don't recognize that the formula is only a small aspect of what gives the work its charge.

It's helpful to continually challenge your own process. If you had a good result using a specific style, method, or working condition, don't assume that is the best way. Or your way. Or the only way. Avoid getting religious about it. There may be other strategies that work just as well and allow new possibilities, directions, and opportunities. ³

This is not always true, but it's something to consider. ⁴



Holding every rule as breakable is a healthy way to live as an artist. It loosens constraints that promote a predictable sameness in our working methods. ⁵

As you get further along in your career, a consistency may develop that's of less interest over time. Your work can start to feel like a job or a responsibility. So it's helpful to notice if you've been working with the same palette of colors all along. ⁶

Start the next project by scrapping that palette. The uncertainty that results can be a thrilling and scary proposition. Once you have a new framework, some elements of your older process may find their way back into the work, and that's okay. ⁷

It's helpful to remember that when you throw away an old playbook, you still get to keep the skills you learned along the way. These hard-earned abilities transcend rules. They're yours to keep. Imagine what can arise when you overlay an entirely new set of materials and instructions over your accumulated expertise. ⁸

As you move away from familiar rules, you may bump up against more hidden rules that have been guiding you all along, without your knowledge. Once recognized, these rules may be released or used with more intention. ⁹

Any rule is worth testing, be it conscious or unconscious. Challenge your assumptions and methods. You might find a better way. And even if it's not better, you'll learn from the experience. All of these experiments are like free throws. You have nothing to lose.

Beware of the assumption
that the way you work
is the best way
simply because
it's the way you've done it before.

1

The Opposite Is True ¹



For any rules you accept ²

of what you can and cannot do as an artist . . . ³
of what your voice is and isn't . . .
of what's required to do the work and what you don't need . . .
it would be worthwhile to try the opposite.

If you're a sculptor, for example, you might start with the idea that what you're making has to exist in the material world. That would be a rule. ⁴

To explore the opposite would be to consider how a sculpture can exist without being a physical object. Perhaps your best work could be conceived digitally or conceptually, with no solid footprint. Or maybe it won't be your best work, but the thought process might lead you somewhere novel and intriguing. ⁵

Think of a rule as an imbalance. Darkness and light are only meaningful in relationship with each other. Without one, the other wouldn't exist. They are a matched dynamic system, like yin and yang. ⁶

Examine your methods and consider what the opposite would be. What would balance the scales? What would be the light to your dark, or the dark to your light? It's not uncommon for an artist to focus on one end of the seesaw. Even if we don't choose to create on the other side, understanding this polarity can inform our choices. ⁷

Another strategy might be to double down, to take the shades you're currently working in to the extreme. ⁸

Only through experimenting with balance do you discover where you are on the seesaw. Once you identify your position, you can move to the opposite ⁹

side to find balance or go further out along the limb you're on, creating more¹ leverage.

For every rule followed, examine the possibility that the opposite might² be similarly interesting. Not necessarily better, just different. In the same way, you can try the opposite or the extreme of what's suggested in these pages and it will likely be just as fruitful.

Listening¹



When listening, there is only now. In Buddhist practice, a bell is rung as part² of the ritual. The sound instantly pulls the participant into the present moment. It's a small reminder to wake up.

While the eyes and the mouth can be sealed, an ear has no lid, nothing to³ close. It takes in what surrounds it. It receives but can't transmit.

The ear is simply present to the world.⁴

When we hear, sounds enter the ear autonomously. Often, we're not⁵ aware of all the individual sounds and their full range.

Listening is paying attention to those sounds, being present with them,⁶ being in communion with them. Though to say that we listen with the ears, or the mind, might be a misconception. We listen with the whole body, our whole self.

The vibrations filling the space around us, the act of sound waves hitting⁷ the body, the spatial perceptions they indicate, the internal physical reactions they stimulate—this is all part of listening. Certain bass sounds can be felt only in the body, they can't be perceived by the ears.

The difference can be noticed when listening to music through⁸ headphones instead of speakers.

Headphones create an illusion, tricking your senses into believing you are⁹ hearing everything the music is offering. Many artists refuse to use headphones in the studio as it is a poor replica of the real-world listening experience. With speakers, we are closer to the sound of instruments in the room—immersed physically in a full sonic spectrum of vibration.

Many of us experience life as if we're taking it in through a pair of headphones. We strip away the full register. We hear information, but don't detect the subtler vibrations of feeling in the body.

When you practice listening with the whole self, you expand the scope of your consciousness to include vast amounts of information otherwise missed, and discover more material to feed your art habit.

If it's music you're listening to, consider closing your eyes. You may find yourself getting lost in the experience. When the piece ends, you might be surprised by where you find yourself. You've been transported to another place. The place where the music lives.



Communication moves in two directions, even when one person speaks and another listens silently.

When the listener is totally present, the speaker often communicates differently. Most people aren't used to being fully heard, and it can be jarring for them.

Sometimes we block the flow of information being offered and compromise true listening. Our critical mind may kick in, taking note of what we agree with and what we don't, or what we like and dislike. We may look for reasons to distrust the speaker or make them wrong.

Formulating an opinion is not listening. Neither is preparing a response, or defending our position or attacking another's. To listen impatiently is to hear nothing at all.

Listening is suspending disbelief.

We are openly receiving. Paying attention with no preconceived ideas. The only goal is to fully and clearly understand what is being transmitted, remaining totally present with what's being expressed—and allowing it to be what it is.

Anything less is not only a disservice to the speaker, but also to yourself.¹ While creating and defending a story in your own head, you miss information that might alter or evolve your current thoughts.

If we can go beyond our reflexive response, we may find there is something more beneath that resonates with us or helps our understanding.² The new information might reinforce an idea, slightly alter it, or completely reverse it.

Listening without prejudice is how we grow and learn as people. More often than not, there are no right answers, just different perspectives. The more perspectives we can learn to see, the greater our understanding becomes. Our filter can begin to more accurately approach what truly is, rather than a narrow sliver interpreted through our bias.³

Regardless of the type of art you're making, listening opens possibilities.⁴ It allows you to see a bigger world. Many of our beliefs were learned before we had a choice in what we were taught. Some of them might go back generations and may no longer apply. Some may never have applied.

Listening, then, is not just awareness. It's freedom from accepted limitations.⁵

Patience¹



There are no shortcuts.²

The lottery winner isn't ultimately happy after their sudden change of fortune. The home built hastily rarely survives the first storm. The single-sentence summary of a book or news event is no substitute for the full story.³

We often take shortcuts without knowing it. When listening, we tend to skip forward and generalize the speaker's overall message. We miss the subtleties of the point, if not the entire premise. In addition to the assumption that we are saving time, this shortcut also avoids the discomfort of challenging our prevailing stories. And our worldview continues to shrink.⁴

The artist actively works to experience life slowly, and then to re-experience the same thing anew. To read slowly, and to read and read again.⁵

I might read a paragraph that inspires a thought, and while my eyes continue moving across the page in the physical act of reading, my mind may still be lost in the previous idea. I'm not taking in information anymore. When I realize this, I return to the last paragraph I can recall and start reading from there again. Sometimes it's three or four pages back.⁶

Re-reading even a well-understood paragraph or page can be revelatory.⁷ New meanings, deeper understandings, inspirations, and nuances arise and come into focus.

Reading, in addition to listening, eating, and most physical activities, can be experienced like driving: we can participate either on autopilot or with focused intention. So often we sleepwalk through our lives. Consider how different your experience of the world might be if you engaged in every activity with the attention you might give to landing a plane.⁸

There are those who approach the opportunities of each day like crossing items off a to-do list instead of truly engaging and participating with all of themselves.

Our continual quest for efficiency discourages looking too deeply. The pressure to deliver doesn't grant us time to consider all possibilities. Yet it's through deliberate action and repetition that we gain deeper insight.



Patience is required for the nuanced development of your craft.

Patience is required for taking in information in the most faithful way possible.

Patience is required for crafting a work that resonates and contains all that we have to offer.

Every phase of an artist's work and life benefits from cultivating this achievable habit.

Patience is developed much like awareness. Through an acceptance of what is. Impatience is an argument with reality. The desire for something to be different from what we are experiencing in the here and now. A wish for time to speed up, tomorrow to come sooner, to relive yesterday, or to close your eyes then open them and find yourself in another place.

Time is something that we have no control over. So patience begins with acceptance of natural rhythms. The implied benefit of impatience is to save time by speeding up and skipping ahead of those rhythms. Paradoxically, this ends up taking more time and using more energy. It's wasted effort.

When it comes to the creative process, patience is accepting that the majority of the work we do is out of our control. We can't force greatness to happen. All we can do is invite it in and await it actively. Not anxiously, as this might scare it off. Simply in a state of continual welcoming.

If we remove time from the equation of a work's development, what we're left with is patience. Not just for the development of the work, but for the development of the artist as a whole. Even the masterpieces that have been produced on tight timelines are the sum of decades spent patiently laboring on other works.¹

If there is a rule to creativity that's less breakable than the others, it's that the need for patience is ever-present.²

Beginner's Mind¹



Some three thousand years ago in China, the strategic board game Go was developed. Some believe warlords and generals based it on the stones they'd place on maps to determine their battle plans. Besides being the oldest continually played board game in human history, it's also one of the most complex.²

In modern times, beating this game became known in the artificial intelligence community as the holy grail. Since the number of possible configurations on the board is larger than the number of atoms in the universe, it was believed computers didn't have the processing power needed to beat a skilled human player.³

Rising to the challenge, scientists built an artificial intelligence program called AlphaGo. The program learned to play by teaching itself, studying more than 100,000 past games. It then played against itself over and over until it was ready to challenge the reigning grandmaster of the game.⁴

In move 37 of the second match, the machine was faced with a decision that would determine the way the rest of the game would be played. There were two apparent choices to be made. Choice A was the kind of move that would signal the computer was playing a game of offense. Choice B would signal it was playing a defensive game.⁵

Instead, the computer decided to make a third move, a move no one steeped in the game had ever made in thousands of years of play. "Not a single human player would choose move 37," one commentator said. Most thought it was a mistake or simply a bad move.⁶

The grandmaster playing against the machine was so taken aback, he stood up and walked out of the room. He eventually returned, not with his usual confident composure but visibly shaken and frustrated by the experience. In the end, AlphaGo won the game. And that never-been-seen-before move, experts said, was the one that turned the course of the game in favor of the AI.

In the end, the computer won four out of five matches, and the grandmaster permanently retired from competition.



Upon first hearing this story, I found myself in tears, and confused by this sudden swell of emotion. After further reflection, I realized that the story spoke to the power of purity in the creative act.

What was it that allowed a machine to devise a move no one steeped in the game had ever made in thousands of years of play?

It wasn't necessarily its intelligence. It was the fact that the machine learned the game from scratch, with no coach, no human intervention, no lessons based on an expert's past experience. The AI followed the fixed rules, not the millennia of accepted cultural norms attached to them. It didn't take into account the three-thousand-year-old traditions and conventions of Go. It didn't accept the narrative of how to properly play this game. It wasn't held back by limiting beliefs.

And so this wasn't just a landmark event in AI development. It was the first time Go had been played with the full spectrum of possibilities available. With a clean slate, AlphaGo was able to innovate, devise something completely new, and transform the game forever. If it had been taught to play by humans, it most likely wouldn't have won the tournament.

One Go expert commented, "After humanity spent thousands of years improving our tactics, computers tell us that humans are completely wrong . . . I would go as far as to say not a single human has touched the edge of the truth of Go."

To see what no human has seen before, to know what no human has known before, to create as no human has created before, it may be necessary to see as if through eyes that have never seen, know through a mind that has never thought, create with hands that have never been trained.

This is beginner's mind—one of the most difficult states of being to dwell in for an artist, precisely because it involves letting go of what our experiences have taught us.

Beginner's mind is starting from a pure childlike place of not knowing. Living in the moment with as few fixed beliefs as possible. Seeing things for what they are as presented. Tuning in to what enlivens us in the moment instead of what we think will work. And making our decisions accordingly. Any preconceived ideas and accepted conventions limit what's possible.

We tend to believe that the more we know, the more clearly we can see the possibilities available. This is not the case. The impossible only becomes accessible when experience has not taught us limits. Did the computer win because it knew more than the grandmaster or because it knew less?

There's a great power in not knowing. When faced with a challenging task, we may tell ourselves it's too difficult, it's not worth the effort, it's not the way things are done, it's not likely to work, or it's not likely to work *for us*.

If we approach a task with ignorance, it can remove the barricade of knowledge blocking progress. Curiously, not being aware of a challenge may be just what we need to rise to it.



Innocence brings forth innovation. A lack of knowledge can create more openings to break new ground. The Ramones thought they were making mainstream bubblegum pop. To most others, the lyrical content alone—about lobotomies, sniffing glue, and pinheads—was enough to challenge this assumption.

While the band saw themselves as the next Bay City Rollers, they unwittingly invented punk rock and started a countercultural revolution.

While the music of the Bay City Rollers had great success in its time, the Ramones' singular take on rock and roll became more popular and influential. Of all the explanations of the Ramones, the most apt may be: innovation through ignorance.



Experience provides wisdom to draw from, but it tempers the power of naivete. The past can be a teacher, offering tried and true methods, familiarity with the standards of the craft, awareness of potential risks, and in some cases virtuosity. It lures us into a pattern that absolves us of the opportunity to engage innocently with the task at hand.

The more ingrained your adopted approach, the harder it is to see past it. Though experience doesn't rule out innovation, it can make it more difficult to access.

Animals, like children, don't have a hard time making a decision. They act out of innate instinct, not learned behavior. This primitive force packs an ancient wisdom that science has yet to catch up with.

These childlike superpowers include being in the moment, valuing play above all else, having no regard for consequences, being radically honest without consideration, and having the ability to freely move from one emotion to the next without holding on to story. For children, each moment in time is all there is. No future, no past. *I want it now, I'm hungry, I'm tired.* All pure authenticity.

The great artists throughout history are the ones able to maintain this childlike enthusiasm and exuberance naturally. Just as an infant is selfish, they're protective of their art in a way that's not always cooperative. Their needs as a creator come first. Often at the expense of their personal lives and relationships.

For one of the most loved singer-songwriters of all time, if inspiration comes through, it takes precedence over other obligations. His friends and family understand that in the middle of a meal, conversation, or event, if a song calls, he'll exit the scene and tend to it, without explanation.

Accessing childlike spirit in our art and our lives is worth aspiring to. It's¹ simple to do if you haven't accumulated too many fixed habits and thoughts. If you have, it's very difficult. Nearly impossible.

A child has no set of premises it relies on to make sense of the world. It² may serve you to do the same. Any label you assume before sitting down to create, even one as foundational as sculptor, rapper, author, or entrepreneur, could be doing more harm than good. Strip away the labels. Now how do you see the world?

Try to experience everything as if for the first time. If you grew up in a³ landlocked town that you never left, the first time you traveled and saw the ocean would likely be a dramatic, awe-inspiring experience. If you spent your whole life living near the ocean, your experience of it would almost certainly be less dramatic.

When you see what's present around you as if for the first time, you start⁴ to realize how astonishing it all is.

As artists, we aim to live in a way in which we see the extraordinary⁵ hidden in the seemingly mundane. Then challenge ourselves to share what we see in a way that allows others a glimpse of this remarkable beauty.

Talent is the ability to let ideas
manifest themselves through you.

1

Inspiration¹



It appears in a moment.²

An immaculate conception.³

A divine flash of light. An idea that would otherwise require labor to unfold suddenly blooms in a single inhalation.⁴

What defines inspiration is the quality and quantity of the download. At a speed so instantaneous, it seems impossible to process. Inspiration is the rocket fuel powering our work. It is a universal conversation we yearn to be part of.⁵

The word comes from the Latin—*inspirare*, meaning to breathe in or blow into.⁶

For the lungs to draw in air, they must first be emptied. For the mind to draw inspiration, it wants space to welcome the new. The universe seeks balance. Through this absence, you are inviting energy in.⁷

The same principle applies to everything in life. If we are looking for a relationship when we're already in one, then we are full. There is no room for the new to enter. And we are unable to welcome in the relationship we want.⁸

To create space for inspiration, we might consider practices of quieting the mind: meditation, awareness, silence, contemplation, prayer, any ritual that helps us fend off distraction and papancha.⁹

Breath itself is a potent vehicle to calm our thoughts, create space, and tune in. It cannot guarantee that inspiration will come, though the vacancy may draw the muse in to play.¹⁰

Taken more spiritually, inspiration means *to breathe life into*. An ancient interpretation defines it as the immediate influence of the divine. For the¹¹

artist, inspiration is a breath of creative force drawn in instantly from outside¹ of our small selves. We can't be sure where this spark of insight originates. It's helpful to know it's not us alone.

When inspiration does arrive, it is invariably energizing. But it is not² something to rely on. An artistic life cannot be built solely around waiting. Inspiration is out of our control and can prove hard to find. Effort is required and invitations are to be extended. In its absence, we may work on other areas of the project independent of this cosmic transmission.

Epiphanies are hidden in the most ordinary of moments: the casting of a³ shadow, the smell of a match igniting, an unusual phrase overheard or misheard. A dedication to the practice of showing up on a regular basis is the main requirement.

To vary your inspiration, consider varying your inputs. Turn the sound off⁴ to watch a film, listen to the same song on repeat, read only the first word of each sentence in a short story, arrange stones by size or color, learn to lucid dream.

Break habits.⁵
Look for differences.
Notice connections.

One indicator of inspiration is awe. We tend to take so much for granted.⁶ How can we move past disconnection and desensitization to the incredible wonders of nature and human engineering all around us?

Most of what we see in the world holds the potential to inspire⁷ astonishment if looked at from a less jaded perspective. Train yourself to see the awe behind the obvious. Look at the world from this vantage point as often as possible. Submerge yourself.

The beauty around us enriches our lives in so many ways. It is an end in⁸ itself. And it sets an example for our own work. We can aim to develop an eye for harmony and balance, as if our creations have always been here, like mountains or feathers.



Ride the wave as long as it can be ridden. If you are fortunate enough to experience the strike of inspiration, take full advantage of the access. Remain in the energy of this rarefied moment for as long as it lasts. When flowing, keep going. ¹

If you're a writer and you tap into a stream of ideas before bed, you may want to stay with it until dawn. If you're a musician and you've reached your goal of creating one song or ten songs, yet the music is still coming, capture all you can. ²

The work yielded may not be used in the current project, but it may be of use another time. Or it may not. The task of the artist is simply to recognize the transmission and stay with it in gratitude, until it truly runs its course. ³

In terms of priority, inspiration comes first. You come next. The audience comes last. ⁴ ⁵

These are special moments and are to be treated with the utmost devotion. Our schedules are set aside when these fleeting moments of illumination come. Summon your strength and commit yourself on behalf of this offering, even when it arises at an inopportune time. This is the serious artist's obligation. ⁶

John Lennon once advised that if you start a song, write it through to the end in that sitting. The initial inspiration has a vitality in it that can carry you through the whole piece. Don't be concerned if some of the parts are not yet all they can be. Get through a rough draft. A full, imperfect version is generally more helpful than a seemingly perfect fragment. ⁷

When an idea forms, or a hook is written, we may feel that we've cracked the code and the rest will take care of itself. If we step away and let that initial spark fade, we may return to find it's not so easy to rekindle. Think of inspiration as a force not immune to the laws of entropy. ⁸

Habits¹



The first thing I would show players at our initial day of training was how to take a little extra time putting on their shoes and socks properly.

The most important part of your equipment is your shoes and socks. You play on a hard floor. So you must have shoes that fit right. And you must not permit your socks to have wrinkles around the little toe—where you generally get blisters—or around the heels.

I showed my players how I wanted them to do it. Hold up the sock, work it around the little toe area and the heel area so that there are no wrinkles. Smooth it out good. Then hold the sock up while you put the shoe on. And the shoe must be spread apart—not just pulled on the top laces.

You tighten it up snugly by each eyelet. Then you tie it. And then you double-tie it so it won't come undone—because I don't want shoes coming untied during practice, or during the game. I don't want that to happen.

That's just a little detail that coaches must take advantage of, because it's the little details that make the big things come about.

The sentiments above are John Wooden's, the most successful coach in the history of college basketball. His teams won more consecutive games and championships than any others in history.

It must have been frustrating for these elite athletes, who wanted to get on the court and show what they could do, to arrive at practice for the first time with this legendary coach only to hear him say, Today we will learn to tie our shoes.

The point Wooden was making was that creating effective habits, down to the smallest detail, is what makes the difference between winning and losing games. Each habit might seem small, but added together, they have an exponential effect on performance. Just one habit, at the top of any field, can be enough to give an edge over the competition.

Wooden considered every aspect of the game where an issue might arise,¹ and trained his players for each one. Repeatedly. Until they became habits.

The goal was immaculate performance. Wooden often said the only² person you're ever competing against is yourself. The rest is out of your control.

This way of thinking applies to the creative life just as well. For both the³ artist and the athlete, the details matter, whether the players recognize their importance or not.

Good habits create good art. The way we do anything is the way we do⁴ everything. Treat each choice you make, each action you take, each word you speak with skillful care. The goal is to live your life in the service of art.



Consider establishing a consistent framework around your creative process. It⁵ is often the case that the more set in your personal regimen, the more freedom you have within that structure to express yourself.

Discipline and freedom seem like opposites. In reality, they are partners.⁶ Discipline is not a lack of freedom, it is a harmonious relationship with time. Managing your schedule and daily habits well is a necessary component to free up the practical and creative capacity to make great art.

It could even be said that a focused efficiency in life is more important⁷ than one in work. Approaching the practical aspects of your day with military precision allows the artistic windows to be opened in childlike freedom.

Creativity-supporting habits can begin the moment you arise each day.⁸ These might include looking at sunlight before screenlight, meditating (outdoors if possible), exercising, and showering in cold water before beginning creative time in a suitable space.

These habits look different for everyone, and perhaps different for the⁹ same artist from day to day. You might sit in the forest, pay attention to your thoughts, and make notes. Or drive in a car for an hour, with no destination in mind, listening to classical music and seeing if any sparks arise.

It's helpful to set scheduled office hours, **or uninterrupted periods of joyful play that allow your imagination to soar.** For one person, that window of time might be three hours, for another thirty minutes. Some prefer to work from dusk 'til dawn, while others create in twenty-minute sessions, with five-minute breaks between each. ¹

Find the sustainable rituals that best support your work. If you set a routine that is oppressive, you'll likely find excuses not to show up. It's in the interest of your art to create an easily achievable schedule to start with. ²

If you commit to working for half an hour a day, something good can happen that generates momentum. You may then look at the clock and realize you've been working for two hours. The option is always open to extend your creative hours once the habit is formed. ³

Feel free to experiment. The goal is to commit to a structure that can take on a life of its own, instead of creating only when the mood strikes. Or to start each day with the question of how and when you're going to work on your art. ⁴

Put the decision making into the work, not into *when* to work. The more you reduce your daily life-maintenance tasks, the greater the bandwidth available for creative decisions. Albert Einstein wore the same thing daily: a gray suit. Erik Satie had seven identical outfits, one for each day of the week. **Limit your practical choices to free your creative imagination.** ⁵



We all yearn to establish new healthy, productive habits, such as exercising, eating more local, natural foods, or practicing our craft more regularly. ⁷

But how often do we consider examining and removing the habits that currently drive our days? How often do we regard behaviors accepted as “the way people are” or “the way we are” merely as habits? ⁸

Each of us has automatic habits. We have habits in movement. Habits in speech, thought, and perception. Habits in being ourselves. Some of them have been practiced every day since we were children. A pathway gets carved into the brain and becomes difficult to change. Most of these habits control ⁹

us, beyond our decisions, to the point they function autonomously and automatically, like the regulation of our body temperature.¹

I recently learned a different way of swimming. It felt awkward and counterintuitive, because I learned to swim when I was very young. My previous method was so ingrained, I didn't ever have to think about it. I effortlessly knew how to do it. It had worked well enough to get me from one side of the pool to the other, even though there were other ways that could take me farther and faster with more ease.²

In our artistic pursuits, we also rely on habits to get from one point to another. Some of them don't serve the work or they undermine its progress. When we stay open and pay close attention, it is possible to recognize these less helpful habits and soften their spell. And begin to explore new practices. Ones that come in and out of our creative lives like temporary collaborators, remaining as long as they serve the work and departing when they are no longer beneficial.³

Thoughts and habits not conducive to the work: 1

- Believing you're not good enough. 2
- Feeling you don't have the energy it takes. 3
- Mistaking adopted rules for absolute truths. 4
- Not wanting to do the work (laziness). 5
- Not taking the work to its highest expression (settling). 6
- Having goals so ambitious that you can't begin. 7
- Thinking you can only do your best work in certain conditions. 8
- Requiring specific tools or equipment to do the work. 9
- Abandoning a project as soon as it gets difficult. 10
- Feeling like you need permission to start or move forward. 11
- Letting a perceived need for funding, equipment, or support get in the way. 12
- Having too many ideas and not knowing where to start. 13
- Never finishing projects. 14
- Blaming circumstances or other people for interfering with your process. 15
- Romanticizing negative behaviors or addictions. 16
- Believing a certain mood or state is necessary to do your best work. 17
- Prioritizing other activities and responsibilities over your commitment to making art. 18
- Distractibility and procrastination. 19
- Impatience. 20
- Thinking anything that's out of your control is in your way. 21