Weather Resistant Productivity

Arm yourself with the finest, battle-tested productivity tools of all time.

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Imagine you are a character in a fantasy novel, and you are the hero of your own journey. As you begin, you need to pack your bag, populate your belt, and build your armor for a long road ahead. You need to select, in advance, the essential items to bring with you.

In this article, I urge you to not underestimate the power of approaching the mundane topic of 'productivity' with this mindset. Whether you are conscious of it or not, you probably rely on just a handful of essential, proven tools to tackle a new project or foray into new territory in your life.

The purpose of this article is to help you get smarter about how you ready yourself for your next adventure. It is a guide for selecting these essential tools and, crucially, how they work together in a deliberate way. I call this mindset 'Weather Resistant Productivity'.

I've recently found great joy in revisiting *The Fellowship of the Ring*. It's not just about the comfort of me escaping to another land and immersing myself in a beautiful story. There's a spirit, depth, and principle-oriented nature to the work that energizes me.

Chapter 3 paints a picture of the crew getting ready to travel:

> *Sam was the most laden of the party, and he had a large pack filled with all sorts of things that might be useful on the journey. Among them, he had rope, which he had long thought of taking, and a box of salt that he had considered essential.*

> *… [he] was carrying a large heavy bag on his back, with cooking gear and blankets and everything that could be crammed in: he had his own spare clothes, and some of Frodo's and a lot of handkerchiefs (which he suspected his master might forget)."*

> *… Merry was in high spirits, but he was carrying a pack with his own provisions and a large number of useful items: a tinder-box, flint and steel, a coil of strong rope, a small pot for cooking, a spoon, and a small knife. He had thought of everything that a sensible hobbit might need when traveling.*

> *.. Pippin was burdened with a pack that seemed far too large for him, filled with an odd assortment of things, including a hatchet, several blankets, a flask of water, and a small bag of apples. He also insisted on bringing along a brightly colored scarf, 'just in case,' he said, though Frodo wasn't sure in case of what."*

> *.. Sam fussed over the cooking gear, making sure all the pots and pans were securely tied. Merry and Pippin compared their supplies and laughed at how much they had packed, though they were secretly relieved to have everything they might need.*

The crew had considered everything, but our hero had a bit more of a minimalist take on the matter:

> *Frodo only took with him some clothing, a bit of food, and his small sword that had hung over the fireplace at Bag End.*

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Maybe it was the sense of urgency or secrecy of the mission that motivated Frodo to pack light (possibly advice from our hero's mentor Gandalf). Or perhaps it was the psychological weight of carrying the ring. Either way, there is something inspiring about the mission-oriented mentality of Frodo and something comforting about how Frodo's crew considered everything else.

I argue that this distinction between packing what is essential vs. what is comforting can help you simultaneously be nimble in accomplishing your mission and provision yourself appropriately along the way. If you're a creator—whether running your own business, working for a company within the industry, or even a hobbyist—you're likely juggling a multitude of tasks large and small, personal and professional. Having worked multi-year stints across government, academia, and industry, I have come to realize that when I'm at my best in any sector, it's when I'm really good at using only a handful of tools together.

Let's further torture this metaphor. As the hero of this journey, imagine that you have a wise mentor. Fuck it. It's Gandalf. Gandalf himself—not me—has actually come to help you on this journey. Let's begin 🏔️.

Ages ago, the term productivity was agriculturally-motivated and meant something like "amount of food produced per unit of land". It is a relatively precise definition that helps one to be clear about what is desired and how to measure progress. This 'metric-based' approach also served useful through the industrial revolution and has seeped its way into modern knowledge work. Cal Newport's book *Slow Productivity* dives deep into the consequences of this, but I am more concerned right now with how modern 'eras of productivity' have subsequently evolved and how we use tools now and moving forward.

In a recent podcast, Newport tells a richer-than-expected story of the last few decades of productivity. In short, in the late 20th century, figures like Stephen Covey championed principle-centered advice in works such as *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. This era emphasized human dignity and holistic success, integrating personal and professional goals into a cohesive life philosophy.

The early 2000s witnessed a rise of more complex systems like David Allen's *Getting Things Done.* It was a response to the increasing demands of the modern workplace and recent technological advancements (eg. rise of email in the workplace). These systems aimed to reduce stress by organizing every task and responsibility and creating a detailed, arguably algorithmic approach to productivity.

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, Tim Ferriss's *The 4-Hour Work Week* epitomized a minimalist movement and lifestyle design. This period encouraged simplification, automation, and the pursuit of meaningful work, minimizing stress, maximizing freedom, and rejecting the complexity of previous systems.

In recent years, we seem to have acknowledged that most people still work 'normal jobs', but the discussion on productivity has focused on a pushback against the culture of overwork and 'psuedo-productivity'. Greg McKeown and Newport, for example, advocate for these ideas in *Essentialism, Deep Work*, and *Slow Productivity*. These ideas emphasize doing fewer things, but doing them better, and protecting one's time from distractions to focus on high-value tasks.

Understanding this history helps us see why a one-size-fits-all system is probably a myth. Each era has offered its own solutions, but none have provided an ultimate answer. This is why my sense is that the real challenge—and opportunity—lies in building your own weather resistant toolkit. Like a perfectly worn leather toolbelt, this kit of yours incorporates the time-tested tools and best practices from these different eras. And most importantly, it allows for the flexibility and adaptability required in a world moving so fast that AI tools are already changing the game.

As you begin to build your toolkit, be warned of two kinds of people.

The first kind will make a compelling implicit or explicit argument that you can do almost everything you need in one all-in-one tool. For example, in Notion, it's quite straightforward to take simple notes, create a larger collaborative document, store tasks, and even manage calendar events. Notion has some simple but powerful primitives and a robust database feature to manage all these things under one umbrella. My intent is not to pick on Notion. Similar flavors of arguments could be made for Obsidian, org-mode, Google ecosystem, Apple ecosystem, etc.

People of this ilk are a kind and smart folk. They seek, see, and value the elegance of unification through all-in-one tools. The problem is most projects and long journeys are simply … complicated. They are so multifaceted that it is easy to find something—often many things—an all-in-one tool is not well suited for.

The second kind of person is more insidious. They will make a compelling implicit or explicit argument that 'productivity systems' are largely unnecessary and you should just focus on doing the work. What this breed lacks in tooling and systems they may make up in sheer talent and competence. But their stumbles can quickly turn to bad falls if they lack a foundation to support them and a lighthouse by which to guide them forward.

> *Craft your workflows with care.*

The Art of Unix Programming is a book that, while steeped in the geeky history of a particular computer technology, offers insights that reach far beyond its original scope.

> *If you are not a programmer, or you are a programmer who has had little contact with the Unix world, this may seem strange. But Unix has a culture; it has a distinctive art of programming; and it carries with it a powerful design philosophy.*

This philosophy is centered around the still relevant idea of building small, modular tools that each do one job exceptionally well. These battle-tested tools can be quickly chained together in workflows that solve very specific problems to the end user in a way that is surprisingly reliable.

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The foundation—the 'uber tool' of Weather Resistant Productivity—is your written workflows. It is what provides the footing from which you can determine which direction you would like to go. It is a concise, written description of your set of tools and workflows using them. This is not just another item in your toolkit—it's the glue that holds everything together. It's the map to your productivity journey, outlining how each tool is used, how they interact, and how they help you achieve your goals.

Here is an example of what a set of written workflows could look like. This is actually a variant and subset of my current workflow as of this writing.

```
Daily planning workflow:


Mentally commit to one key highlight per day.
    Bonus: display highlight in other places (eg. homescreen,
sticky note)
            highlight is a complete sentence
Review recent daily log entries
Review calendar through Apple Calendar (iOS, MacOS) backed by
Google Calendar
    (see also 'Create personal tasks workflow')
Briefly review and update bullet journal seasonal planning spread
and
    make calendar adjustments accordingly
    (see also 'Seasonal planning workflow')


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Seasonal planning workflow:


Schedule time roughly quarterly via the 'Capture personal tasks'
workflow
Encode plan in a bullet journal seasonal planning spread


Note: bullet journal spreads group projects roughly by 'essential
space'
    (eg. software craftsmanship, financial management,
relationships)


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Capture and retreive shopping items workflow:


Combine
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```
    lists from family in WhatsApp messages,
    items in sticky note on fridge, and
    daily log entries prefixed with 'get '


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Capture personal tasks workflow:


Create events in either my
    main Google calendar (these events must get done at specified
time) or
    'Frontier' Google calendar (time for completion is flexible)


Note: while calendars are backed by Google cloud, I prefer Apple's
apps


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Capture and review personal project ideas workflow:


Create daily log entries that look like: 'ideas, XYZ'


If I decide to pursue a project idea:
    Add project to bullet journal seasonal planning spread
        ideally with rough end date and categorized by essential
space
        (see 'Seasonal planning workflow')
    Create a directory within a 'Projects/' directory


If a project is complete:
    Move project directory from 'Projects/' to 'Archives/'


Notes:
    Projects are referred to by the same name across different
media
```

Project and Archive directories are synced to cloud via
Obsidian Sync

Capture and review reference material workflow:

Create daily log entries that look like: 'XYZ [[<PKE Article>]]'
Cultivate PKE Articles as Wikipedia-like Markdown documents

Notes:
    Articles are stored locally in my 'Spaces' directory
    Articles are synced to cloud using Obsidian sync
    Articles are generally reviewed and edited in Obsidian

Capture and review for content consumption workflow

Create daily log entries that look like: '<YouTube URL>, note 1,
note 2, ...'
    for YouTube videos

...

Capture and review voice notes workflow:

Create voice memo using Apple Voice Memos app and
    save voice memo as a daily log entry
Extract appropriate content to either the
    'capture and review reference material',
    'capture and review personal/work tasks',
    'capture and review personal project ideas',

Capture and review work tasks workflow:

Encode all tasks in JIRA tickets assigned to me

Notes:
    Tasks are distinguished primarily between 'queued', 'in
progress' states
    Use the 'Capture personal tasks' workflow to time block work
task
    If knowledge is transferrable outside work
        Use the 'capture and review reference material' workflow

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Create and review work documentation workflow:

Notes:
    Use in-house Notion for processes and project planning
    Use Github for architecture and code-related documentation
    Use Confluence for compliance-related documentation
    If knowledge is transferrable outside work
        Use the 'capture and review reference material' workflow
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Create daily log entry workflow:

Create log entry primarily through 'Capture Media' iOS shortcut.

Notes:
    iOS shortcut works on iPhone, Mac, through typing and voice
dictation

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    iOS shortcut works for text, images, PDFs, audio, and video
    iOS shortcut triggerable by physical keyboard, speaker,
AirPods, HomePods
    Log entries are formatted like '- [ ] HH:MM <entry>' in
Obsidian daily note
    Log entries are typically reviewed in Obsidian
    Log entries are stored in my local 'Log/' directory
    Log engtries are synced to cloud using Obsidian Sync
```

While this set of workflows is not comprehensive, it's actually not that far from complete, and you can see a few important patterns:

- Tools are very important, but workflows are the focus
- Workflows include planning on multiple scales of time
- Workflows are written in near complete sentences for clarity
- Workflows are pretty simple and easy to read at-a-glance
- Workflows can be referenced by each other
- Personal and professional workflows can talk to each other
- Physical and digital tools are both present
- The format is not rigid

It may seem a bit silly to write down workflows that may be largely engrained in your head already. However, you may realize after writing down your workflows that they can be improved or simplified. It also is a good way to track changes and determine whether and where new technologies can fit.

The point is that this may be the first time that you have explicitly thought about your workflows. Don't overthink it. The exercise may take a half-hour to an hour at most, and this will be a document that you can revisit and refine over time. It's a sort of scaffold from which you can view and sculpt your day-to-day workflows from different perspectives.

> *… technology has changed so rapidly, software environments have come and gone so quickly, that technical cultures have been weak and ephemeral. There are, however, exceptions to this exception. A very few software technologies have proved durable enough to evolve strong technical cultures, distinctive arts, and an associated design philosophy transmitted across generations of engineers.*

> *The Unix culture is one of these.*

The greatest benefit of crafting your workflows in this way is that you can be appropriately critical when adding a new tool to your essential toolbelt while simultaneously being at peace with playing around with all sorts of new and potentially useful tools.

For example, I have found that a high bar must be cleared to replace my text editing habits that have been honed for decades, my trusted spreadsheet skills that have proven useful again and again, and my ability to chain together Unix command line tools to solve all sorts of data management problems. On the other hand, I am way more excited at the prospect of, for example, replacing elements of my task or project management workflows with Todoist or Trello respectively if I already have some solid criteria on which to evaluate and compare them to my existing workflow.

This 'Unix like philosophy' I've mentioned is also self-aware and acknowledges its own limitations. While it's true that "there's a bedrock of unchanging basics" within Unix that has stood the test of time, this minimalist approach isn't always the best fit for every situation. The idea of using "small pieces loosely joined" can sometimes lead to complexity when those pieces need to work together, requiring careful integration and a clear understanding of how each tool fits into the broader system.

Yet, despite these challenges, the philosophy underpinning Unix — and by extension, Weather Resistant Productivity — offers a net positive. It teaches us that simplicity, when applied thoughtfully, can lead to powerful, adaptable systems that are built to last. The wisdom in *The Art of Unix Programming* is not just for programmers. It's for anyone looking to build a productivity system that can withstand the test of time

It takes a little upfront discipline to explicitly define what your workflows are and subsequently craft them with care, but this modest investment will pay dividends sooner than you think if your experience is anything like mine.

But if creating this initial set of workflows still seems like a bit of a lift, I have an even simpler suggestion: *create a 'what works' list.* While it is great to learn about how to be productive based on what has worked for others, there is no substitute for realizing what actually works for you, and this can help clarify what your set of workflows look like or should look like.

You can compile this list on-the-fly when you realize that something actually works well for you. It can be even less structured and more messy. Here's an example of a subset of my list:
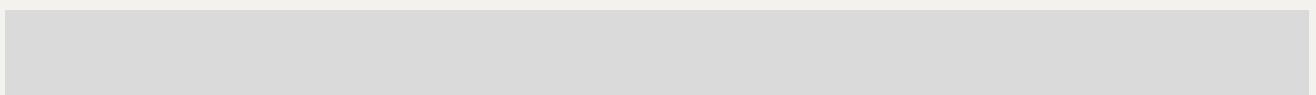
```
having just one or a handful of reliable places to capture
everything
anticipation of doing work in the future: esp 'finish line sprint'
of a project
keeping key items in working memory
physical rewards derived from doing hard things
time blocking on digital calendar, distract myself when anxious
carry one thing (eg. laptop, physical notebook) as a motivation to


'just do it' for the smaller, 'high friction' tasks
reviewing events in the past and reflecting with gratitude
laptop
bujo for lists, longer-term planning, and notes from in-person
discussions
uniform naming of projects and workflows across tools
writing down a desired ideal outcome for the day or season
brief shut down procedure at the end of every day
reading and writing the highest quality findings after a deep
investigation
alarms: especially on apple watch
free public services: library, parks and rec, events and safety
programs
following your 'highest thought' that intuitively feels the most
right
naps
avoiding negative overreaction in the moment
intrinsic motivation, external support
building on a foundation and iterating
post it notes, especially for grocery lists
```

This is clearly not a set of well defined workflows, but you can see how it could easily seed one (eg. see how stickies tend to work for grocery lists, time blocking seems to work well on digital calendars, etc.). In my experience this list has been useful to me beyond just helping to seed a set of productivity workflows, so I recommend to anyone to just give it a shot.

Most people view applications like a document editor, a spreadsheet, or a project management system as relatively boring. They are essentially table stakes and at times even necessary nuisances to get the job done. When is the last time you heard a colleague say "check out my cross-sheet use of 'SUMIF' and pivot tables in this spreadsheet!", or "did you see the amazing card covers and use of Butler automations on her Trello board?"

I encourage a different approach to using these tools: *mastery*. You should be extremely adept at using tools you spend a reasonably large fraction of your day using. This means you should not be shy to dig deep when learning about them, use them in a way that is efficient in your workflows, and—dare I say—have *fun*.

For example, if you or your organization uses Google Docs to write project proposals or specifications, then it behooves you to use the tool efficiently and make the output beautiful to consume. Or if you're a programmer and your team uses JIRA for project management, but you loathe its UX, invest some upfront time to see how you can use its API or scripting capabilities. This could result in great efficiencies and a much more pleasant day-to-day experience. Like compound interest growing money, you will likely enjoy what seems like incremental improvements to order-of-magnitude efficiency gains.

Photo by Philip Swinburn on Unsplash

To help you purchase the set of tools you wish to master, here is a 'shop' organizing tools roughly by category. This list is also not comprehensive (eg. I avoid tools related to content consumption) but hopefully this gets the idea across and provides a starting point from which you can begin to populate your toolbelt. Note that it is also meant to be general purpose, so I don't include highly specialized tools related to eg. programming, I have also included 'personal essential(s)': tools to illustrate a snapshot in time on the tools I prefer.

- **Quick capture and visuals**. This is one of the most important categories of tools I can think of. It is crucial for clearing your mind and having a handful of places where you know you can process this information later. This is probably the single most valuable contribution of *Getting Things Done*. Example tools include Post-it notes, Apple Reminders, Google Keep, Drafts, etc. Pick a tool or two that is the most seamless for you to offload information that resonates in almost any circumstance. Personal essential: iOS Shortcuts, see 'Create daily log

entry workflow'

- **Document and text editor**. Here is where you feel the most comfortable refining and crafting your digital thoughts. I generally see two subclasses of tools here. One is more for lightweight notes or documents and the other is for heavier duty documents that include for example, long form articles or books. Example tools include Text Edit, Notepad, iA Writer, Typora, Vi, Emacs, Google Docs, Microsoft Word, TeX (and eg. Overleaf for collaboration), Scrivener, Obsidian editor, Notion collaborative pages, etc. Personal essentials: Vi, Google Docs

- **Calendar**. like document editing, this is a tool that you will probably spend a lot of time in every day and has a collaborative element to it. We should therefore choose this tool very carefully and make sure that simply viewing events in all kinds of forms (e.g. on your home screen, on your desktop computer) is a desirable and pleasant experience and that it is reliable. You never want to be stuck in a situation where you missed an event invite due to an obscure calendar synchronization issue. Examples include: Google Calendar, Apple Calendar, Fantastical, Outlook, etc. Personal essentials: Google Calendar (cloud), Apple Calendar (app)

- **Presentation**. Probably one of three tools applies to you here and you will need a really good reason for using anything else: Microsoft PowerPoint, Apple Keynote, Google Slides. Personal essential: Google Slides

- **Spreadsheet**. I actually consider this category to be more of a 'lightweight database management' tool since most tools in this category have varying levels of power and flexibility associated with tables. Probably one of two tools applies to you here and you will need a really good reason for using anything else: Microsoft Excel or Google Sheets. Other notable tool examples include: Notion, Smartsheets, Personal Essential: Google Sheets (though I wonder whether Notion tables and charts should just replace a lot of spreadsheets)

- **Doodling and figures.** This class of tools is especially important and I think that it isn't well served by other tools (for example, figures within presentation tools). A good drawing tool helps you really think and convey information visually in the way that you can't in any other tool. Examples include: Omnigraffle, Excalidraw, Whimsical, Freeform, Skitch, etc. Personal Essential: Excalidraw

- **Task lists and project management.** this is a particularly interesting category to me because I find that there are some very well designed and useful apps but due to the fact that there are two large dimensions of tasks: personal vs professional and small vs large, there is no one tool that will cleanly rule them all. This perfectly highlights why it's useful to write down your workflows. Example tools: Todoist, Trello, Amplenote, JIRA, Asana, Reminders + Apple Calendar, Google Tasks + Calendar, …. Personal essential: see 'Daily planning workflow' above.

- **Filesystem, synchronization, and version history**. despite a growing amount of our data being abstracted away from files, and in the cloud, file systems have remained a durable and fundamental part of any productivity and organization system. The reasons for this in my view are actually quite deep and left as the subject of a separate article. Example tools: USB Drive, Dropbox, iCloud, Github, Gitlab, Obsidian Sync, etc. Personal essentials: Obsidian Sync, Github

- **Graphics, audio, and video processing.** almost all of us will end up doing some basic form of image, audio, and video editing. It's useful to have a few select tools that you know you're good at and you can dig deep with when this skill is needed. example tools: Audacity, ffmpeg, Inkscape, Photoshop, Gimp, Illustrator, Premier, Final Cut, iMovie, …. Personal essentials: ffmpeg, iMovie, Gimp

- **AI assistant.** At the moment, I feel the best way to treat AI tools is as our companions. As generalized AI models get smarter specialized assistants will be useful in very unique way, but we will all probably rely deeply on a generalized AI assistant within the next year or so (of this writing). Examples: ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, Llama, Claude, …. Personal essential: ChatGPT

- **Physical items.** Even in a digitally driven world, there is no comparison to a well-chosen and well-worn set of physical productivity items. There are only a handful of them and they are crucial to your everyday operation. Examples include: computer, phone, tablet, headphones, mouse, pen, physical journal. Personal essentials: Macbook Pro, iPhone, Airpods Gen 3, Logitech MX Master, Pentel Energel, Official Bullet Journal.

If your first thought when seeing all of these tools is, "I could see myself using almost any or most of these tools, depending on the need or my inclination." or "this is just a laundry list of obvious productivity tools, why do I care?", ask yourself the question, "which of these tools is it worth investing the time to *master*?" The answer might surprise you, as it

may not be the tool with the best features, best ecosystem compatibility, most elegantly designed interface, highest appeal, or most open-source friendly. It may simply be the tool that most everyone uses in your discipline and is industry standard. Clarifying basic things like this with yourself will help keep you focused on mastery and avoid distraction when it is not helpful.

The importance of mastery does not lie in the selection of the tool as much as it does your repeated practice with it. The purpose of listing the categories above is to illustrate that many of the tools listed perform the same underlying functions. Mastery is not about how good *the* sword you have is, but about how well you wield *a* sword you have been given. The wondrous details and differentiators of any particular tool in a category may be appealing to our sense of aesthetics and comfort (very important!) but are not essential for mastery.

There is a reason why productivity tool lists and reviews are so popular. Each new one dangles a promise in front of you. If you just tried *this* tool out, you may solve a key problem *way* better way than you currently are solving it.

The problem with these promises is that that you need to know how you *currently* solve your problems and what you actually may actually benefit from. This is why it is so important to write down in simple language what your workflows are and what tools you use. Weather Resistant Productivity is about being able to whittle down and refine this set of problems and workflows over time to the point where you can carry the whole thing with you in your mind and on your person.

Weather Resistant Productivity is:

- **Repeatable**: Like a student of a martial arts discipline, repetition is about ensuring that the tools and methods you use are so deeply ingrained in your workflow, that they are second nature. It's through this deliberate repetition that you build resilience when under external pressure, making your productivity system weather resistant.

- **Durable**: Can you imagine yourself relying on your tools and workflows even years from now? Are you using data storage formats that will stand the test of time? You don't have to commit to your tools and workflows for that time, but they should at least pass this litmus test.

- **Simple**: Your system should be straightforward and easy enough to manage that you can retreive key elements of it into your working memory on-call and begin to play immediately. Complexity and optimization beyond this is likely to provide diminishing returns, or worse, sabotage your efforts.

- **Seamless**: You should feel that your tools work together in a way that is very smooth and allows for data to be easily input to and output from them. For example, most of the time a simple copy-and-paste will do the job, but you may find that a light application of more powerful tools (eg. Zapier, IFTTT, Unix Power Tools, Scripting) can provide significant gains if the complexity of your application demands it.

- **Adaptable**: You should be able to quickly adjust your system as life changes. This is the motivation behind describing your workflows in super concise and plain language: they are easy to modify as your needs change.

In the end, adopting weather resistant productivity is simple. It binds you to only this promise: write down your workflows and iterate. The beauty of this approach is that it puts you in the drivers seat: it's not someone else's tool or someone else's productivity method. It's yours. And I'm convinced that the more we share with each other our own created systems, the more fun we have in improving and iterating on our own.

May your tools be well-chosen and your craft precisely honed, so you can weather any storm with confidence. Wishing you strength and clarity for the path ahead.

P.S. If you're comfortable, please feel *at home.* You are welcome share your workflow either directly to me (geetduggal@gmail.com) or comment in this post 🪵.