

**TWYLA THARP**  
**THE CREATIVE HABIT**  
**LEARN IT AND USE IT FOR LIFE**

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

WITH MARK REITER

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# The Creative Habit

I walk into a

# white room

I walk into a large white room. It's a dance studio in midtown Manhattan. I'm wearing a sweatshirt, faded jeans, and Nike cross-trainers. The room is lined with eight-foot-high mirrors. There's a boom box in the corner. The floor is clean, virtually spotless if you don't count the thousands of skid marks and footprints left there by dancers rehearsing. Other than the mirrors, the boom box, the skid marks, and me, the room is empty.

In five weeks I'm flying to Los Angeles with a troupe of six dancers to perform a dance program for eight consecutive evenings in front of twelve hundred people every night. It's my troupe. I'm the choreographer. I have half of the program in hand—a fifty-minute ballet for all six dancers set to Beethoven's twenty-

ninth piano sonata, the “Hammerklavier.” I created the piece more than a year ago on many of these same dancers, and I’ve spent the past few weeks rehearsing it with the company.

The other half of the program is a mystery. I don’t know what music I’ll be using. I don’t know which dancers I’ll be working with. I have no idea what the costumes will look like, or the lighting, or who will be performing the music. I have no idea of the length of the piece, although it has to be long enough to fill the second half of a full program to give the paying audience its money’s worth.

The length of the piece will dictate how much rehearsal time I need. This, in turn, means getting on the phone to dancers, scheduling studio time, and getting the ball rolling—all on the premise that something wonderful will come out of what I fashion in the next few weeks in this empty white room.

My dancers expect me to deliver because my choreography represents their livelihood. The presenters in Los Angeles expect the same because they’ve sold a lot of tickets to people with the promise that they’ll see something new and interesting from me. The theater owner (without really thinking about it) expects it as well; if I don’t show up, his theater will be empty for a week. That’s a lot of people, many of whom I’ve never met, counting on me to be creative.

But right now I’m not thinking about any of this. I’m in a room with the obligation to create a major dance piece. The dancers will be here in a few minutes. What are we going to do?

To some people, this empty room symbolizes something profound, mysterious, and terrifying: the task of starting with nothing and working your way toward creating something whole and beautiful and satisfying. It’s no different for a writer rolling a fresh sheet of paper into his typewriter (or more likely firing up the blank screen on his computer), or a painter confronting a virginal canvas, a sculptor staring at a raw chunk of stone, a composer at the piano with his fingers hovering just above the keys. Some people find this moment—the moment before creativity begins—so painful that they simply cannot deal with it. They get up and walk away from the computer, the canvas, the keyboard; they take a nap

or go shopping or fix lunch or do chores around the house. They procrastinate. In its most extreme form, this terror totally paralyzes people.

The blank space can be humbling. But I've faced it my whole professional life. It's my job. It's also my calling. Bottom line: Filling this empty space constitutes my identity.

I'm a dancer and choreographer. Over the last 35 years, I've created 130 dances and ballets. Some of them are good, some less good (that's an understatement—some were public humiliations). I've worked with dancers in almost every space and environment you can imagine. I've rehearsed in cow pastures. I've rehearsed in hundreds of studios, some luxurious in their austerity and expansiveness, others filthy and gritty, with rodents literally racing around the edges of the room. I've spent eight months on a film set in Prague, choreographing the dances and directing the opera sequences for Milos Forman's *Amadeus*. I've staged sequences for horses in New York City's Central Park for the film *Hair*. I've worked with dancers in the opera houses of London, Paris, Stockholm, Sydney, and Berlin. I've run my own company for three decades. I've created and directed a hit show on Broadway. I've worked long enough and produced with sufficient consistency that by now I find not only challenge and trepidation but peace as well as promise in the empty white room. It has become my home.

After so many years, I've learned that being creative is a full-time job with its own daily patterns. That's why writers, for example, like to establish routines for themselves. The most productive ones get started early in the morning, when the world is quiet, the phones aren't ringing, and their minds are rested, alert, and not yet polluted by other people's words. They might set a goal for themselves—write fifteen hundred words, or stay at their desk until noon—but the real secret is that they do this every day. In other words, they are disciplined. Over time, as the daily routines become second nature, discipline morphs into habit.

It's the same for any creative individual, whether it's a painter finding his way each morning to the easel, or a medical researcher returning daily to the

laboratory. The routine is as much a part of the creative process as the lightning bolt of inspiration, maybe more. And this routine is available to everyone.

Creativity is not just for artists. It's for businesspeople looking for a new way to close a sale; it's for engineers trying to solve a problem; it's for parents who want their children to see the world in more than one way. Over the past four decades, I have been engaged in one creative pursuit or another every day, in both my professional and my personal life. I've thought a great deal about what it means to be creative, and how to go about it efficiently. I've also learned from the painful experience of going about it in the worst possible way. I'll tell you about both. And I'll give you exercises that will challenge some of your creative assumptions—to make you stretch, get stronger, last longer. After all, you stretch before you jog, you loosen up before you work out, you practice before you play. It's no different for your mind.

I will keep stressing the point about creativity being augmented by routine and habit. Get used to it. In these pages a philosophical tug of war will periodically rear its head. It is the perennial debate, born in the Romantic era, between the beliefs that all creative acts are born of (a) some transcendent, inexplicable Dionysian act of inspiration, a kiss from God on your brow that allows you to give the world *The Magic Flute*, or (b) hard work.

If it isn't obvious already, I come down on the side of hard work. That's why this book is called *The Creative Habit*. Creativity is a habit, and the best creativity is a result of good work habits. That's it in a nutshell.

The film *Amadeus* (and the play by Peter Shaffer on which it's based) dramatizes and romanticizes the divine origins of creative genius. Antonio Salieri, representing the talented hack, is cursed to live in the time of Mozart, the gifted and undisciplined genius who writes as though touched by the hand of God. Salieri recognizes the depth of Mozart's genius, and is tortured that God has chosen someone so unworthy to be His divine creative vessel.

Of course, this is hogwash. There are no "natural" geniuses. Mozart was his father's son. Leopold Mozart had gone through an arduous edu-



cation, not just in music, but also in philosophy and religion; he was a sophisticated, broad-thinking man, famous throughout Europe as a composer and pedagogue. This is not news to music lovers. Leopold had a massive influence on his young son. I question how much of a “natural” this young boy was. Genetically, of course, he was probably more inclined to write music than, say, play basketball, since he was only three feet tall when he captured the public’s attention. But his first good fortune was to have a father who was a composer and a virtuoso on the violin, who could approach keyboard instruments with skill, and who upon recognizing some ability in his son, said to himself, “This is interesting. He likes music. Let’s see how far we can take this.”

Leopold taught the young Wolfgang everything about music, including counterpoint and harmony. He saw to it that the boy was exposed to everyone in Europe who was writing good music or could be of use in Wolfgang’s musical development. Destiny, quite often, is a determined parent. Mozart was hardly some naive prodigy who sat down at the keyboard and, with God whispering in his ears, let the music flow from his fingertips. It’s a nice image for selling tickets to movies, but whether or not God has kissed your brow, you still have to work. Without learning and preparation, you won’t know how to harness the power of that kiss.

Nobody worked harder than Mozart. By the time he was twenty-eight years old, his hands were deformed because of all the hours he had spent practicing, performing, and gripping a quill pen to compose. That’s the missing element in the popular portrait of Mozart. Certainly, he had a gift that set him apart from others. He was the most complete musician imaginable, one who wrote for all instruments in all combinations, and no one has written greater music for the human voice. Still, few people, even those hugely gifted, are capable of the application and focus that Mozart displayed throughout his short life. As Mozart himself wrote to a friend, “People err who think my art comes easily to me. I assure you, dear friend, nobody has devoted so much time and thought to composition as I. There is not a famous master whose music I have not industriously

studied through many times.” Mozart’s focus was fierce; it had to be for him to deliver the music he did in his relatively short life, under the conditions he endured, writing in coaches and delivering scores just before the curtain went up, dealing with the distractions of raising a family and the constant need for money. Whatever scope and grandeur you attach to Mozart’s musical gift, his so-called genius, his discipline and work ethic were its equal.

I’m sure this is what Leopold Mozart saw so early in his son who, as a three-year-old, one day impulsively jumped up on the stool to play his older sister’s harpsichord—and was immediately smitten. Music quickly became Mozart’s passion, his preferred activity. I seriously doubt that Leopold had to tell his son for very long, “Get in there and practice your music.” The child did it on his own.

More than anything, this book is about preparation: In order to be creative you have to know how to prepare to be creative.

No one can give you your subject matter, your creative content; if they could, it would be their creation and not yours. But there’s a process that generates creativity—and you can learn it. And you can make it habitual.

There’s a paradox in the notion that creativity should be a habit. We think of creativity as a way of keeping everything fresh and new, while habit implies routine and repetition. That paradox intrigues me because it occupies the place where creativity and skill rub up against each other.

It takes skill to bring something you’ve imagined into the world: to use words to create believable lives, to select the colors and textures of paint to represent a haystack at sunset, to combine ingredients to make a flavorful dish. No one is born with that skill. It is developed through exercise, through repetition, through a blend of learning and reflection that’s both painstaking and rewarding. And it takes time. Even Mozart, with all his innate gifts, his passion for music, and his father’s devoted tutelage, needed to get twenty-four youthful symphonies under his belt before he composed something enduring with number twenty-five. If art is the bridge between what you see in your mind and what the world sees, then skill is how you build that bridge.

That's the reason for the exercises. They will help you develop skill. Some might seem simple. Do them anyway—you can never spend enough time on the basics. Before he could write *Così fan tutte*, Mozart had practiced his scales.

While modern dance and ballet are my *métier*, they are not the subject of this book. I promise you that the text will not be littered with dance jargon. You will not be confused by first positions and pliés and tendus in these pages. I will assume that you're a reasonably sophisticated and open-minded person. I hope you've been to the ballet and seen a dance company in action on stage. If you haven't, shame on you; that's like admitting you've never read a novel or strolled through a museum or heard a Beethoven symphony live. If you give me that much, we can work together.

The way I figure it, my work habits are applicable to everyone. You'll find that I'm a stickler about preparation. My daily routines are transactional. Everything that happens in my day is a transaction between the external world and my internal world. Everything is raw material. Everything is relevant. **Everything is usable.** Everything feeds into my creativity. But without proper preparation, I cannot see it, retain it, and use it. Without the time and effort invested in getting ready to create, you can be hit by the thunderbolt and it'll just leave you stunned.

Take, for example, a wonderful scene in the film *The Karate Kid*. The teenaged Daniel asks the wise and wily Mr. Miyagi to teach him karate. The old man agrees and orders Daniel first to wax his car in precisely opposed circular motions (“Wax on, wax off”). Then he tells Daniel to paint his wooden fence in precise up and down motions. Finally, he makes Daniel hammer nails to repair a wall. Daniel is puzzled at first, then angry. He wants to learn the martial arts so he can defend himself. Instead he is confined to household chores. When Daniel is finished restoring Miyagi's car, fence, and walls, he explodes with rage at his “mentor.” Miyagi physically attacks Daniel, who without thought or hesitation defends himself with the core thrusts and parries of karate. Through Miyagi's deceptively simple chores, Daniel has absorbed the basics of karate—without knowing it.

In the same spirit as Miyagi teaches karate, I hope this book will help you be more creative. I can't guarantee that everything you'll create will be wonderful—that's up to you—but I do promise that if you read through the book and heed even half the suggestions, you'll never be afraid of a blank page or an empty canvas or a white room again. Creativity will become your habit.

## Chapter 2

# rituals

# of preparation

I begin each day of my life with a ritual: I wake up at 5:30 A.M., put on my workout clothes, my leg warmers, my sweatshirts, and my hat. I walk outside my Manhattan home, hail a taxi, and tell the driver to take me to the Pumping Iron gym at 91st Street and First Avenue, where I work out for two hours. The ritual is not the stretching and weight training I put my body through each morning at the gym; the ritual is the cab. The moment I tell the driver where to go I have completed the ritual.

It's a simple act, but doing it the same way each morning habitualizes it—makes it repeatable, easy to do. It reduces the chance that I would skip it or do

it differently. It is one more item in my arsenal of routines, and one less thing to think about.

Some people might say that simply stumbling out of bed and getting into a taxicab hardly rates the honorific “ritual.” It glorifies a mundane act that anyone can perform.

I disagree. First steps are hard; it’s no one’s idea of fun to wake up in the dark every day and haul one’s tired body to the gym. Like everyone, I have days when I wake up, stare at the ceiling, and ask myself, Gee, do I feel like working out today? But the quasi-religious power I attach to this ritual keeps me from rolling over and going back to sleep.

It’s vital to establish some rituals—automatic but decisive patterns of behavior—at the beginning of the creative process, when you are most at peril of turning back, chickening out, giving up, or going the wrong way.

A ritual, the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells me, is “a prescribed order of performing religious or other devotional service.” All that applies to my morning ritual. Thinking of it as a ritual has a transforming effect on the activity.

Turning something into a ritual eliminates the question, Why am I doing this? By the time I give the taxi driver directions, it’s too late to wonder why I’m going to the gym and not snoozing under the warm covers of my bed. The cab is moving. I’m committed. Like it or not, I’m going to the gym.

The ritual erases the question of whether or not I like it. It’s also a friendly reminder that I’m doing the right thing. (I’ve done it before. It was good. I’ll do it again.)

We all have rituals in our day, whether we’re aware of them or not.

A friend, a hard-boiled pragmatist with not a spiritual bone in his body, practices yoga in the morning in his home to overcome back pain. He starts each session by lighting a candle. He doesn’t need the candle to do his poses (although the mild glow and the faint scent have a tonic effect, he says), but the ceremonial act of lighting this votive candle transforms yoga into a sanctifying ritual. It means he’s taking the session seriously, and that for the next ninety minutes he



is committed to practicing yoga. **Candle. Click. Yoga.** An automatic three-step call-and-response mechanism that anchors his morning. When he's done, he blows out the candle and goes on with the rest of his day.

An executive I know begins each day with a twenty-minute meeting with her assistant. It's a simple organizational tool, but turning it into a daily ceremony for two people intensifies the bond between them and gives their day a predictable, repeatable kick-start. They don't have to think about what to do when they arrive at the office. They already know it's their twenty-minute ritual.

Dancers are totally governed by ritual. It begins with class from 10:00 A.M. to noon every day, where they stretch and warm up their muscles and put their bodies through the classic dance positions. They do this daily, without fail, because all dancers working in class know that their efforts at strengthening the muscles will armor them against injury in rehearsal or performance. What makes it a ritual is that they do it without questioning the need.

As with all sacred rites, the beginning of class is beautiful to watch. The dancers may straggle in and mill about, but they eventually assume, with frighteningly formal rigor, their customary place at the barre or on the floor. If a principal dancer walks in, they automatically shift places to give the star the center spot facing the mirror. Of such beliefs and traditions are rituals made. It's like going to church. We rarely question why we go to church, and we don't expect concrete answers when we do. We just know it feeds our spirit somehow, and so we do it.

A lot of habitually creative people have preparation rituals linked to the setting in which they choose to start their day. By putting themselves into that environment, they begin their creative day.

The composer Igor Stravinsky did the same thing every morning when he entered his studio to work: He sat at the piano and played a Bach fugue. Perhaps he needed the ritual to feel like a musician, or the playing somehow connected him to musical notes, his vocabulary. Perhaps he was honoring his hero, Bach, and seeking his blessing for the day. Perhaps it was nothing more

than a simple method to get his fingers moving, his motor running, his mind thinking music. But repeating the routine each day in the studio induced some click that got him started.

**I know a chef** who begins each day in the meticulously tended urban garden that dominates the tiny terrace of his Brooklyn home. He is obsessed with fresh ingredients, particularly herbs, spices, and flowers. Spending the first minutes of the day among his plants is his ideal creative environment for thinking about new flavor combinations and dishes. He putters about, feeling connected to nature, and this gets him going. Once he picks a vegetable or herb, he can't let it sit there. He has to head off to the restaurant and start cooking.

**A painter I know** can't do anything in her studio without propulsive music pounding out of the speakers. Turning it on turns on a switch inside her. The beat gets her into a groove. It's the metronome for her creative life.

**A writer friend** can only write outside. He can't stand the thought of being chained indoors to his word processor while a "great day" is unfolding outside. He fears he's missing something stirring in the air. So he lives in Southern California and carries his coffee mug out to work in the warmth of an open porch in his backyard. Mystically, he now believes he is missing nothing.

In the end, there is no one ideal condition for creativity. What works for one person is useless for another. The only criterion is this: Make it easy on yourself. Find a working environment where the prospect of wrestling with your muse doesn't scare you, doesn't shut you down. It should make you want to be there, and once you find it, stick with it. To get the creative habit, you need a working environment that's habit-forming.

All preferred working states, no matter how eccentric, have one thing in common: When you enter into them, they impel you to get started. Whether it's

the act of carrying a hot coffee mug to an outdoor porch, or the rock 'n' roll that gets a painter revved up to splash color on a canvas, or the stillness of an herb garden that puts a chef in a culinary trance, moving inside each of these routines gives you no choice but to *do something*. It's Pavlovian: follow the routine, get a creative payoff.

Athletes know the power of a triggering ritual. A pro golfer may walk along the fairway chatting with his caddie, his playing partner, a friendly official or scorekeeper, but when he stands behind the ball and takes a deep breath, he has signaled to himself that it's time to concentrate. A basketball player comes to the free-throw line, touches his socks, his shorts, receives the ball, bounces it exactly three times, and then he is ready to rise and shoot, exactly as he's done a hundred times a day in practice. By making the start of the sequence automatic, they replace doubt and fear with comfort and routine.

It worked for Beethoven, too, as these sketches, rendered between 1820 and 1825 by J. D. Böhm, show. Although he was not physically fit, Beethoven would



start each day with the same ritual: a morning walk during which he would scribble into a pocket sketchbook the first rough notes of whatever musical idea inevitably entered his head. Having done that, having limbered up his mind and transported himself into his version of a trance zone during the walk, he would return to his room and get to work.

As for me, my preferred working state is thermal—I need heat—and my preferred ritual is getting warm. That's why I start my day at the gym. I am in perpetual pursuit of body warmth. It can never be too hot for me. Even in the middle of sweltering August, when the rest of New York is half frozen in the comforts of air-conditioning, I have all the windows and doors of my apartment wide open as if to say, "Hello, heat!" I loathe air-conditioning. I like skin that is just about to break out in glistening sweat.

There's also a psychological component to heat: It calls up the warmth of the hearth and home. In a word, it says "mother," which is all about feeling safe and secure. A warm, secure dancer can work without fear. In that state of physical and psychic warmth, dancers touch their moments of greatest physical potential. They're not afraid to try new movements. They can trust their bodies, and that's when magic happens. When they're not warm, dancers are afraid—afraid of injury, afraid of looking bad to others, afraid they're falling short of the inner bar they set for themselves. That's a rotten state to be in.

There's a practical reason for this, of course. Unlike other art forms, dance is all about physical movement and exertion. Even in my sixties, I need to keep my muscles in a state of readiness to pursue my craft, so that when I demonstrate a step in rehearsal I can actually execute it with some amplitude and grace and not hurt myself. Every athlete knows this: warm up before playing or you'll pull a muscle. If I am warm, I feel I can do anything.

My morning workout ritual is the most basic form of self-reliance; it reminds me that, when all else fails, I can at least depend on myself. It's my algebra of self-reliance: I depend on my body in order to work, and I am more productive if my body is strong. My daily workout is a part of my preparation for work.

This, more than anything else, is what rituals of preparation give us: They arm us with confidence and self-reliance. The talent agent Sam Cohn tells a story about an entertainment lawyer named Burton Meyer who taught him a great lesson through a daily ritual. Cohn was working at CBS at the time, and Meyer thought he was working too hard for CBS and not enjoying himself enough. “You’re overcommitted,” he told Cohn. “You know, I practice law for fun. I don’t have to do this. And I’ll tell you how that came about. Ever since I was a young lawyer, each day I would come back from lunch and I would close my office door, I would sit in my chair, and for one hour I would quietly ruminate on one question. And the question was this: Burt, what’s in it for you?”

A ritual of asking “What’s in it for me?” might not provide the most open-minded philosophy of life, but it will keep you focused on your goals. Taken to extremes, it’s an unattractive way of seeing the world, but it does place your motivation right smack in front of you.

When I walk into the white room I am alone, but I am alone with my:

body      ambition  
needs      memories  
distractions      fears

# ideas      passions goals      prejudices

These ten items are at the heart of who I am. Whatever I'm going to create will be a reflection of how these have shaped my life, and how I've learned to channel my experiences into them.

The last two—distractions and fears—are the dangerous ones. They're the habitual demons that invade the launch of every project. No one starts a creative endeavor without a certain amount of fear; the key is to learn how to keep free-floating fears from paralyzing you before you've begun. When I feel that sense of dread, I try to make it as specific as possible. Let me tell you my five big fears:

1. People will laugh at me.
2. Someone has done it before.
3. I have nothing to say.
4. I will upset someone I love.
5. Once executed, the idea will never be as good as it is in my mind.

These are mighty demons, but they're hardly unique to me. You probably share some. If I let them, they'll shut down my impulses ("No, you can't do that") and perhaps turn off the spigots of creativity altogether. So I combat my fears with a staring-down ritual, like a boxer looking his opponent right in the eye before a bout.

**1. People will laugh at me?** Not the people I respect; they haven't yet, and they're not going to start now. (Some others have. London's *Evening Standard* from 1966: "Three girls, one of them named Twyla Tharp, appeared at the Albert Hall last evening and threatened to do the same tonight." So what? Thirty-seven years later I'm still here.)

**2. Someone has done it before?** Honey, it's *all* been done before. Nothing's really original. Not Homer or Shakespeare and certainly not you. Get over yourself.

**3. I have nothing to say?** An irrelevant fear. We all have something to say. Plus, you're panicking too soon. If the dancers don't walk out on you, chances are the audience won't either.

4. I will upset someone I love? A serious worry that is not easily exorcised or stared down because you never know how loved ones will respond to your creation. The best you can do is remind yourself that you're a good person with good intentions. You're trying to create unity, not discord. See the curtain call. See the people standing up. Hear the crowd roaring.

5. Once executed, the idea will never be as good as it is in my mind? Toughen up. Leon Battista Alberti, a fifteenth-century architectural theorist, said, "Errors accumulate in the sketch and compound in the model." But better an imperfect dome in Florence than cathedrals in the clouds.

In those long and sleepless nights when I'm unable to shake my fears sufficiently, I borrow a biblical epigraph from Dostoyevsky's *The Demons*: I see my fears being cast into the bodies of wild boars and hogs, and I watch them rush to a cliff where they fall to their deaths.

It's a little more extreme than counting sheep, but it's far more effective for me.

This is a head game, of course. What ritual isn't? Maybe it's a little pathetic that after all this time I need this sort of pep talk to deal with my demons, but the unknown is a fearful place, and anything new is a step into the unknown. That fear is why ancient cultures created rituals in the first place. They lived in constant fear of other tribes, of predatory animals, of nature and the weather, all of which they believed were controlled by one or many awesome and awful deities. They hoped to gain control over their food supply, their herds, their fertility, their safety—their fears—by appeasing the gods with rituals. They would kill a certain kind of animal, and bleed it in a special way, and stack it on a fire, and toss some more animals into the flame, and offer the blood in a gold flask to the heavens—because doing so would guarantee a healthy crop or victory in battle. Rituals seduced the primitive tribes into believing they could control the uncontrollable.



Centuries later, the ancient rituals seem silly (unless, of course, you believe in them). But are they that much different from all the rituals, big and small, that we employ to get through the day? I remember being a very ritualistic kid. I think most kids are. Eager to gain some control over their lives, they concoct games and rites to add sense and form to their world. The dolls have to sit a certain way on the bed. The socks go on their feet before the pants. The walk to school has to be on the north side of the street; the walk back home has to retrace the steps perfectly. When I said my prayers as a child, I was convinced that I had to say so many words during the exhale and so many words on the inhale, or something bad would happen. Weird, right? Not really. Though less brutal, it's not that far removed from slaughtering a cow and offering it to an unseen god to ensure rain.

I know a writer who looks for something to clean around the house when the words aren't coming out. As he sits in front of his computer, feeling stale and stalled, everything around him looks grimy and caked with dust. So he grabs a rag and a spray bottle of Fantastik and gets to work on the crud. When everything is clean and shiny, he sits back down at the screen and the words invariably flow.

He has a sophisticated explanation for why this ritual works, involving neural pathways and emotions and identity and self-worth. The job of a writer, he says, is simple: You write what's in your head. But it becomes an emotional challenge when you can't corral the words into coherent thoughts. Suddenly you doubt yourself. As you wallow in self-doubt, you turn away from the computer screen and see dirt that you hadn't noticed before (certainly not when the work was going well and you didn't need to turn away from the screen); the dirt becomes inextricably linked with the self-doubt, and wiping away the grime cathartically wipes away the self-doubt. The emotional crisis is solved. Let the writing begin.

Personally, I think the key to his cleaning ritual is the fact that he gets up and moves. Movement stimulates our brains in ways we don't appreciate. But I

give some credence to his cute metaphorical link between dirt and doubt. It might be mumbo jumbo, but mystery and mumbo jumbo are a big part of ritual, too. And if it works, why question it.

I know a businessman who has a ritual of unfolding a dollar bill at the start of each deal and staring at it in silence for a moment, because there on the bill, opposite the Great Seal with the bald eagle and the overly ripe *E Pluribus Unum*, above the mysteriously cropped pyramid with the floating eye, is the motto *Annuit coeptis*: “Providence has favored our undertakings.” To some, this might seem superstitious, but a superstition is nothing more than a ritual repeated religiously. The habit, and the faith invested in it, converts it into an act that provides comfort and strength. Every business deal is an act of courage and faith to this executive, and the motto on the dollar bill is his blessing.



The mechanism by which we convert the chemistry of pessimism into optimism is still uncharted. But we do know how debilitating negativity can be and, likewise, how productive optimism is. I am no stranger to pessimism and fear. They can descend on me at night, during those 3:00 A.M. sessions when I can't sleep and I'm consumed by my litany of “issues.” My mind flits from the major issues of how to cope with everything I want to do, to the minor housekeeping details of going to a manicurist to repair my splitting fingernails. At times like this, priorities go astray; a trifle, such as my nails, can leap into the foreground of my fears. I swoon deeper and deeper into a fog of self-doubt and confusion. But rituals help me clear the fog.

The other obstacle to good work, as harmful as one's fears, is distractions.

I know there are people who can assimilate a lot of incoming data from all angles—from newspapers and magazines, movies, television, music, friends, the Internet—and turn it into something wonderful. They thrive on a multitude of stimuli, the more complicated the better. I'm not hard-wired that way. When I

commit to a project, I don't expand my contact with the world; I try to cut it off. I want to place myself in a bubble of monomaniacal absorption where I'm fully invested in the task at hand.

As a result, I find I'm often subtracting things from my life rather than adding them. I've turned that into a ritual as well. I list the biggest distractions in my life and make a pact with myself to do without them for a week. Here are some perennially tempting distractions that I cut out:

**Movies:** This is painful, because I love films and cutting them out costs me something. My parents owned a drive-in movie theater in San Bernardino, California, and I spent a huge part of my childhood working there watching movies. But when I'm absorbed by a project, unless I'm looking at a film to learn something specific, I don't go to movie theaters and I don't rent videos. If I started watching movies for pleasure, I'd become addicted. I'd watch all day and never get anything done.

**Multitasking:** In an accelerated, overachieving world, we all take pride in our ability to do two or more things at the same time: working on vacation; using an elegant dinner to hammer out a business deal; reading while we're groaning on the StairMaster. The irony of multitasking is that it's exhausting; when you're doing two or three things simultaneously, you use more energy than the sum of energy required to do each task independently. You're also cheating yourself because you're not doing anything excellently. You're compromising your virtuosity. In the words of T. S. Eliot, you're "distracted from distractions by distractions."

It's a challenge to cut out multitasking because we all get a frisson of satisfaction from being able to keep several balls in the air at once. But one week without multitasking is worth it; the increased focus and awareness are their own rewards.

**Numbers:** More than anything, I can live without numbers—the ones on clocks, dials, meters, bathroom scales, bills, contracts, tax forms, bank statements, and royalty reports. For one week I tell myself to “stop counting.” I don’t look at anything with a number in it. This is not that great a hardship; it means mostly that I don’t have to deal with grinding business details. The goal is to give the left side of the brain—the hemisphere that does the counting—a rest and let the more intuitive right hemisphere come to the fore.

**Background Music:** I know there are artists who like music in the background when they work; they use the music to block out everything else. They’re not listening to it; it’s there as a form of companionship. I don’t need a soundtrack to accompany my life. Music in the background nibbles away at your awareness. It’s comforting, perhaps, but who said tapping into your awareness was supposed to be comfortable? And who knows how much of your brainpower and intuition the Muzak is draining? When I listen to music, I don’t multitask; I simply listen. Part of it is my job: I listen to music to see if I can dance to it. But another part is simple courtesy to the composer. I listen with the same intensity the composer exerted to string the notes together. I’d expect the same from anyone watching my work. I certainly wouldn’t approve if someone read a book while my dancers were performing.

I don't recommend living without distractions as a permanent lifestyle for anyone. It's too monastic. But anyone can do it for a week, and the payoff will surprise you.

It's a simple equation: Subtracting your dependence on some of the things you take for granted increases your independence. It's liberating, forcing you to rely on your own ability rather than your customary crutches.

There's an American tradition of giving things up to foster self-reliance. Ralph Waldo Emerson was a man of the world who sought solitude and simplicity. Henry David Thoreau turned his back on the distractions of life in society in pursuit of a better and clearer life, and found a rich vein of inspiration and invention in the Massachusetts woods. Emily Dickinson lived as quiet and constricted a life as one can imagine, and channeled her energies directly into her poetry. All three sought lives apart from the hubbub of the city's commerce—and they didn't even have to cope with the roar of the car, the drone of the radio, the blur of television, or the information surfeit of the Internet.

The act of giving something up does not merely clear time and mental space to focus you. It's a ritual, too, an offering where you sacrifice a portion of your life to the metaphoric gods of creation. Instead of goats or cattle, we're sacrificing television or music or numbers—and what is a sacrifice but a ritual?

When you have selected the environment that works for you, developed the start-up ritual that impels you forward every day, faced down your fears, and put your distractions in their proper place, you have cleared the first hurdle. You have begun to prepare to begin.

# exercises

## 1 Where's Your "Pencil"?

In his lovely essay "Why Write?," the novelist Paul Auster tells a story about growing up as an eight-year-old in New York City and being obsessed with baseball, particularly the New York Giants. The only thing he remembers about attending his first major league baseball game at the Polo Grounds with his parents and friends is that he saw his idol, Willie Mays, outside the players' locker room after the game. The young Auster screwed up his courage and approached the great centerfielder. "Mr. Mays," he said, "could I please have your autograph?"

"Sure, kid, sure," the obliging Mays replied. "You got a pencil?"

Auster didn't have a pencil on him, neither did his father or his mother or anyone else in his group.

Mays waited patiently, but when it became obvious that no one present had anything to write with, he shrugged and said, "Sorry, kid. Ain't got no pencil, can't give no autograph."

From that day on, Auster made it a habit to never leave the house without a pencil in his pocket. "It's not that I had any particular plans for that pencil," Auster writes, "but I didn't want to be unprepared. I had been caught empty-handed once, and I

wasn't about to let it happen again. If nothing else, the years have taught me this: If there's a pencil in your pocket, there's a good chance that one day you'll feel tempted to start using it. As I like to tell my children, that's how I became a writer."

What is your pencil? What is the one tool that feeds your creativity and is so essential that without it you feel naked and unprepared?

A Manhattan writer I know never leaves his apartment without reminding himself to "come back with a face." Whether he's walking down the street or sitting on a park bench or riding the subway or standing on a checkout line, he looks for a compelling face and works up a rich description of it in his mind. When he has a moment, he writes it all down in his notebook. Not only does the exercise warm up his descriptive powers, but studying the crags, lines, and bumps of a stranger's face forces him to imagine that individual's life. Sometimes, if he's lucky, the writer attaches a complete biography to the face, and then a name, and then a narrative. Before he knows it, he has the ingredients for a full-fledged story.

I know cartoonists who always carry pen and pad to sketch what they see, photographers who always have a camera in their pockets, composers who carry Dictaphones to capture a snatch of vagabond melody that pops into their heads. They are always prepared.

Pick your "pencil" and don't leave home without it.

## 2 Build Up Your Tolerance for Solitude

Some people are autophobic. They're afraid to be alone. The thought of going into a room to work all by themselves pains them in a way that is, at first, paralyzing within the room, and then keeps them from entering the room altogether.

It's not the solitude that slays a creative person. It's all that solitude *without a purpose*. You're alone, you're suffering, and you don't have a good reason for putting yourself through that misery. To build up your tolerance for solitude, you need a goal.

Sit alone in a room and let your thoughts go wherever they will. Do this for one minute. (Anyone can handle one minute of daydreaming.) Work up to ten minutes a day of this mindless mental wandering. Then start paying attention to your thoughts to see if a word or goal materializes. If it doesn't, extend the exercise to eleven minutes,

then twelve, then thirteen . . . until you find the length of time you need to ensure that something interesting will come to mind. The Gaelic phrase for this state of mind is “quietness without loneliness.”

Note that this activity is the exact opposite of meditation. You are not trying to empty your mind, not trying to sit restfully without conscious thoughts. You’re seeking thoughts from the unconscious, and trying to tease them forward until you can latch onto them. An idea will sneak into your brain. Get engaged with that idea, play with it, push it around—you’ve acquired a goal to underpin this solitary activity. You’re not alone anymore; your goal, your idea, is your companion.

Consider fishing, also a solitary activity. You have the gear and the equipment. You have the flies in the tackle box. You have the boat and the trip you have to take on the water to where the fish are biting. You have the casting over and over again, and the interior musings about how long it’s going to take you to get a bite on the line. And you’re doing this all by yourself for hours! What elevates it, what keeps it from turning into frightening drudgery, of course, is that you have a goal. You want to catch fish.

It’s the same with daydreaming creatively—minus the tackle box, the boat, and the fish. You’re never lonely when your mind is engaged.

Alone is a fact, a condition where no one else is around. Lonely is how you feel about that. Think of five things that you like to do all by yourself. It could be a hot bath, a walk up a favorite hill, that quiet moment of sinking into a chair with coffee when the kids have left for school. Refer back to the list whenever the aloneness of the creative process seems too much for you. The pleasant memories will remind you that *alone* and *lonely* are not the same thing.

Solitude is an unavoidable part of creativity. Self-reliance is a happy by-product.

### 3 Face Your Fears

It’s not only Nature that abhors a vacuum; fear of empty space affects everyone in every creative situation. Where there was nothing, there will be something that has come from within you. That’s a scary proposition. Putting a name to your fears helps cut them down to size.



When you sat in that brainstorming session at work, why didn't you speak up? When that idea for a story flitted through your mind, why didn't you seize it and pursue it? After you started drawing in that sketchbook, why did you stop?

I've told you my five big fears. Here are a few that might be yours:

*I'm not sure how to do it:* A problem, obviously, but we're not talking about constructing the Brooklyn Bridge. If you try and it doesn't work, you'll try a different way next time. Doing is better than not doing, and if you do something badly you'll learn to do it better.

*People will think less of me:* Not people who matter. Your friends will still love you, your children will still call you "mommy," your dog will still go for walks with you.

*It may take too much time:* Yes, it may, but putting it off isn't going to make it happen faster. The golfer Ben Hogan said, "Every day you don't practice you're one day further from being good." If it's something you want to do, make the time.

*It will cost money:* Are your creative efforts worth it to you? Is it something you really want to do? If so, make it your priority. Work around it. Once your basic needs are taken care of, money is there to be used. What better investment than in yourself?

*It's self-indulgent:* So? How often do you indulge yourself? Why shouldn't you? You won't be of much value to others if you don't learn to value yourself and your efforts.

These are some of the best, most paralyzing fears. If you examine your concerns closely, you should be able to identify and break down the ones that are holding you back. Don't run away from them or ignore them; write them down and save the page. There's nothing wrong with fear; the only mistake is to let it stop you in your tracks.

## 4 Give Me One Week Without

People go on diets all the time. If they don't like their weight, they stop eating certain foods. If their spending is out of control, they lock away their credit cards. If they need quiet time at home, they take the phone off the hook. These are all diets of one kind or another. Why not do the same for your creative health? Take a week off from clutter and distractions, such as these:

**Mirrors:** Go a week without looking in the mirror. See what happens to your sense of self. Instead of relying on the image you see reflected in a glass, find your identity in other ways. This forces you to stop looking at yourself so much and start focusing on others. You'll be forced to think more about what you do, and less about how you look. There's a difference between how you see yourself and how you think others see you; you might get confirmation back or you might be surprised. Either way, it's a discovery process. It's also a great technique for heightening your sense of curiosity. I guarantee that after a week without mirrors, you'll be dying to see yourself again. It could be a very interesting reintroduction. You might meet someone totally new.

**Clocks:** Put away your wristwatch. Shield your eyes from clocks. Stop relying on timepieces to gauge the passing of time. If you're engaged in what you're doing, time doesn't matter. It passes swiftly without notice. If you're not engaged, the clock will only depress you more. It tells you what you already know: You're in a rut and things aren't working. You don't need that negativity.

**Newspapers:** Stop reading newspapers and magazines for a week. I don't recommend this as a permanent diet; it eventually breeds ignorance. But one week won't do much damage. It's like going on vacation to a remote island, cut off from the usual media clutter. You may have done that already in your life. What have you lost? More important, what have you gained?

**Speaking:** I know a soprano who nearly ravaged her beautiful voice during a run of difficult opera performances. The cure was three weeks without speaking while her vocal cords recuperated. She enjoyed the self-imposed silence so much, she now has a no-speaking ritual for one week every year. It's not only a rest for her chief artistic muscle—her voice—it's also a stark reminder of the difference between what's worth saying and what isn't. It's the perfect editor for the creative soul.

Once you've done without these four, it's easy to come up with other distractions that invade your creative life without enhancing it. The telephone. The computer. The coffee shop. The car. The television (!). You get the idea. There are a lot of distractions out there—and you can live without them. At least for a little while.