

Unleashing  
Your Creativity:  
*Lessons From A Reluctant Creative*

TOM COTTAR

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## DEDICATION

To my wife, Heather, who's always saying, "You should put that in a book."

TOM COTTAR

# UNLEASHING YOUR CREATIVITY

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“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

-Lao Tzu, 6th Century, BC

Creativity is magical. It's mystical and spiritual and other-worldly. And having the time and encouragement to pursue and explore *the art of creativity* is a gift in the richest sense. I'm indebted to those of you who've encouraged me in my creative pursuits. Everything I am and everything I have been blessed with is only because you have invested in me, encouraged me, challenged me, and not given up on me. It's like they say, “It takes a village to raise an idiot.”

Or something like that.

I think it was Oscar Wilde who said, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” I've never claimed to be fast, so this is good news.

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Tom

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## AN ANGEL IN YOGA PANTS

*Its funny how inspiration can happen in a flash.*

We spend so much of our lives either being busy, or *trying to look* busy. We keep our head down, our shoulder to the wheel, our nose to the grindstone, and any other bodily appendages applied where they need to be in order to look like productive adults. Doesn't feel very inspiring, I know. It feels like work. If the opposite of life is death, then the opposite of *inspiration* must be *expiration*. Which is terrible. Wouldn't you rather *inspire* than *expire*? I know I would.

But sometimes, out of the blue, when you're not paying attention, when you're not even *looking* for inspiration, it happens. Like a bolt of lightning from the midnight sky, something connects. Something glows unexpectedly, as if the great and powerful Oz has just flipped a switch and turned on every single light in Times Square.

Your heart beats. Your mind races. Something within you is aroused. Stirred. Awakened. Ignited. Triggered. Motivated. Stimulated.

*Energized.*

That, my fellow creative, is the buzz we call *inspiration*.

The word 'inspire' literally means '*to breathe into*'. And inspiration happens without warning...unexpectedly, something *breathes into you* and refreshes you. Changes you. Motivates you. Opens your eyes and ears and heart. It tunes the frequency of your soul to receive something right and true and *resonant*.

Like you, I've had experiences like that more than once. A song lyric. A movie quote. The rugged beauty of Big Bend or the serenity of a lonely beach in January. The painting of a local artist that made me weep. The starry night sky in central Texas. The wide-eyed smile of my children. The strange heartbreak of losing my mom to cancer.

Sometimes we can only get *inspired* after we've *expired* and *perspired*. After we've given up, given in and given out. And once we're out of gas, out of words, and out of breath, inspiration blows in like a refreshing summer breeze.

Sometimes, when you're worn out and frustrated like I was, it shows up *as a strange angel with jangly bracelets and yoga pants*.

One spring night I was at an open house for Six String Ranch, an

amazing recording studio tucked down in the heart of Austin, Texas. I'd done some recording projects there before, but tonight it was an open house, packed with crazy-talented people I'd begun to cross paths with. Artists. Producers. Musicians. Writers. Guitarists. Singers. Pianists. Drummers. Designers.

Tonight it was like a *clubhouse* for creativity and talent.

I was nervously making the rounds trying to meet as many people as I could, trying to figure out how in the heck I'd gotten an invite to this 'exclusive' hideout, when a woman stopped me at the coffee bar.

"Hey there, my friend!", she stuck out her hand. "How are you?!?"

She was dressed in yoga pants and a long, multicolored paisley blouse that flowed to her knees. She must've wore a hundred randomly-selected bangle bracelets that jingled with every gesture. Her large hoop earrings were gold and hung down all the way to her collar. Her lips were blindingly pink. She was shorter than average, but BIG on personality. Her enthusiasm caught me off guard. Like...WAY off guard.

"Um... hey. I'm good. How are you?"

"Outstanding!" She gleamed. "Isn't this great?!?"

Sheepishly I responded, "Oh. Yeah. Yeah. It's really great. Tons of great people... really nice. And [the owners] are wonderful...."

I hesitated.

"I'm sorry... have we met??"

"Oh, I don't think so.... I haven't really gotten to know everyone yet, so I just started calling everybody 'friend'. I figure it saves time trying to guess if we're going to end up friends or not. I'm just gonna assume that you and I are gonna end up as pals, and I might as well just start from there."

Her enthusiasm was a little overwhelming, but her proposition to this whole thing was *genius*. I decided I'd just go along with it as well. Why not?

"Well, *friend*... what brings you here?" I asked. "Are you a musician?"

"Oh, no." She replied. "I can't play a lick. Can't sing either. I'm more of a *muse*...". She leaned in towards me, grinning mysteriously.

*Ding! Ding! Ding!* The crazy train had officially arrived. I wasn't sure if she was crazy, or high, or just plain eccentric, but I got busy

looking for an exit strategy. Surely there's someone else around here I should be talking to. I've got too much crazy in my life as it is. I didn't need to add one more burned out hippie to my bag of nuts.

"What I mean, is I teach creativity...", she continued. "You know... like to people who are creatively 'blocked'. You know... *frustrated*. Most of them don't know *why* they're blocked and frustrated. Sometimes they're business execs who are having trouble in their company. Sometimes they're housewives who feel they're in a rut and what they do doesn't *really* matter. Sometimes it's a musician or writer or artist... so I figured I'd just show up and see if I could find a lonely songwriter to help out ..."

"*Are you friggin' kidding me?*", I thought to myself.

"...So what are you doing here?" she asked.

I. Was. Speechless. Here I was, struggling and frustrated, and the Universe had opened up and sent me a paisley, jangly, bedazzled angel. Why am I *not* surprised?

"You're gonna laugh." I answered. "I have **no** idea why I'm here. Not really. I'm a frustrated songwriter...and I'm looking for inspiration."

She smiled.

Not just an ordinary smile either. You know that ginormous Christmas tree in New York? You know, the one at Rockefeller Plaza that's about a thousand feet tall and lit up every year with about a gazillion twinkly lights? She smiled a smile like *that*. Literally, all I could see was her teeth and her eyes, bright as Christmas morning.

I began to spill my guts. Everything. All of it. Some of which are in the pages that follow. At the time of this writing, I still don't know her name. I don't know where she lives or what she drives. Maybe she was a *literal* angel. I believe it's possible, you know. Or maybe not the literal, metaphysical kind, but at the least the metaphorical kind. The kind of angel that listened and questioned and prodded...and confirmed what was already in me. (Here's a hint: its the same thing that's already in YOU, too.)

Her best advice? "Keep going." That's what you do when you're going through the desert. You don't stop in the middle of it. You keep on going. So whether you're frustrated and burned out, or you just want to infuse your creative juices with something new, you're in the right place! In the pages that follow, I'll spill my guts about my creative journey. I'll share what's worked and what's helped me build my *creative muscle*, as well as how to unleash the creativity inside *you*.

It's in there. Are you ready? Let's get started!

*"The intuitive mind is a sacred gift.  
And the rational mind is a faithful servant.  
We have created a society that honors the servant  
and has forgotten the gift."*

-Albert Einstein

## CREATIVITY: WHERE THOUGHTS BECOME THINGS

How on Earth do you define creativity? Yikes. Ask a hundred people and you're likely to get two hundred definitions. Some say it's a feeling. A force. Or a secret. Some say it's love, or God, or the Source Of All The Universe. Some say it's an energy, or an Entity. Webster's dictionary defines it as "*the ability to make new things*".

\*Yawn\*

How boring is that?!?

Creativity is much more exciting than that. Yes, it's all those things, but it's much, much more! Laurie Halse Anderson said, "When people don't express themselves, they die one piece at a time." That's pretty powerful stuff! If restricting something inside someone causes them to die, then obviously it *must* be a little more important than just "an ability to make new things", don't 'cha think?

Creativity needs room to make mistakes. It needs to be shared and given away and explored and played with. Creativity needs sacred space to thrive in. Whether it's a library, a study, a kitchen table, a studio, a garage... or a bathroom. (Yep... I've hidden away in my bathroom to write and create in peace. Don't judge.) It needs all those things and more.

Creativity is where *thoughts* become *things*. And some wicked-smart people have weighed in on what creativity really is:

Robert A. Schuman is quoted as saying, "Talent works. Genius creates."

Brene Brown says, "Creativity is the way I share my soul with the world."

Someone once said, "Logic will take you from Point A to Point B. but Imagination will take you everywhere."

Actor John Cleese says "Creativity is not the possession of some special talent. It is the willingness to play."

The amazing Maya Angelou once said, "You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have." (I'll admit that this always reminds me of Red Hot Chili Peppers' singing, "Give it away, give it away, give it away now.")

Famed songwriter and producer Charlie Peacock says "It's not just about creativity. It's about the person you're becoming while you create."

And good ol' James Murphy once said, "The best way to complain is to make things."

When it comes to *creativity* and *inspiration*, I'll warn you right here and now: I'm a bit of a mystic. I'm definitely not of the camp that says "We're just flesh and bone and brains and firing synapses, nothing more." I think that's hoey. And I'll tell you why.

For me, creativity is *magic*. It's mystical and spiritual.

If you've ever heard a piece of instrumental music that made you cry, or looked at an abstract painting with tears in your eyes, you understand.

It's the playground where ideas and thoughts and feelings are captured out of the ether and transmitted into physical things. I wholly believe this, and more, about *creativity*.

I have come to realize and believe that marvelous ideas are looking for creative human collaborators every single day. As crazy as it may sound, there seems to be a mystical wild stampede of ideas of every kind constantly galloping towards us, constantly passing by, and constantly trying to get our attention. Our job as creatives is to grab hold of it! I know, I know, that's a

pretty far out statement to make. Trust me...I've heard myself say it before. And you may think I'm crazy. But consider the account of American Poet Ruth Stone.

When Ruth Stone was a child growing up on a farm in rural Virginia, she would be out working in the fields when she would sometimes hear a poem coming toward her—*hear it—rushing* across the landscape at her, like a galloping horse. Whenever this happened, she knew exactly what she had to do next. She would “run like hell” toward the house, trying to stay ahead of the poem, hoping to get to a piece of paper and a pencil fast enough to catch it. That way, when the poem reached her and passed through her, she would be able to grab it and take dictation, letting the words pour forth onto the page. Sometimes, however, she was too slow, and she couldn't get to the paper and pencil in time. In those instances, she could feel the poem rushing right through her body and out the other side. It would be in her for a moment, seeking a response, and then it would be gone before she could grasp it. Galloping away across the earth, as she said, “searching for another poet.”

The wildest thing is sometimes she would nearly miss the poem, but not quite. She would just barely catch it, she explained, “by the tail”, like a tiger. Then she would almost physically pull the poem back into her with one hand, *even as she was taking dictation with the other*. In these instances, the poem would appear on the page from the last word to the first—backward, but completely intact.

*Dude*. That is some big time, freaky, voodoo-style creative magic, right there. I know it sounds absolutely crazy. But I believe in it.



## CHANGE YOUR LIFE IN FIVE WORDS

I'll be honest here: I'm a *word nerd*. And I get completely jazzed when something as little five words can change my life.

My brother and I grew up in a pretty typical southern, conservative, church-going household. We were dragged out of bed early every Sunday morning for church. And, to my surprise, we were also dragged out of church promptly at noon so we could be home in time for Dallas Cowboys football game. Both of which I have now come to appreciate.

Part of that southern upbringing meant we had to memorize certain Bible verses, one of which was the very first verse in the Bible. "*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*" (*Genesis 1:1*) As an adult, it I hadn't thought very deeply about that verse in a while. After all, it seemed like there were a great deal of other verses that demanded my attention. You know, verse like forgiving one another, being a good Samaritan, not committing adultery or murder or tax fraud, and not eating your coworker's leftover brownie when he's not looking. You know, the *important stuff*.

Then one day someone asked me what the first five words of the Bible were. I paused and thought for a moment, as I rattled them off while counting on one hand.

"I guess it's that part that says *'In... the... beginning... God... created...'*"

My heart stopped. I literally quit breathing for a moment. Never have five words taken my breath away like it did then. Those five words pulled back the curtain for me. The blinders came off. The lights came on. Everything changed. Why?

Because in the beginning, *I* created, too. As a child, I drew pictures. I painted with watercolors. I made up puppet shows and plays. I danced and wrote stories. I made up songs and poems. I built contraptions and inventions and forts and spaceships out of cardboard boxes, scrap wood, blankets and dining chairs. Nothing was off limits. Everything was fair game and imagination was *king*. I was never afraid of 'doing it wrong'. I just did it. There were no self-critiques on how well I imagined. No awards and no criticisms. I just *created*.

It's in my nature to create. And it's in yours.

*Disclaimer: You may not believe in God. You may have different religious beliefs than I do. Or none at all. Your image of 'God' may be vastly different than mine. Instead of a loving and creative*

*concept of God, you may think of God as more cold and distant. Or even angry and vengeful. That's fine. Don't let that deter you from engaging with this book or the exercises in it. My point here is this: we **all** have creativity in our DNA. It's in us. We can't help it. Regardless of your spiritual views (or non-views), be open to the idea that each one of us has been given talents and gifts and abilities in the area of creativity. There's no denying it's there. Let's grow it!*

My job—your job— is to create. It's to bring beauty and truth into the world by *creating*. Whether it's through the vehicle of art, music, watercolor, comedy, drama, architecture, story, cooking, literature, gardening, programming, innovating, decorating... or a bazillion other things. It's what we are built to do. And it's not just in me and you... it's in *all* of us. Every single one of us. If you're converting oxygen into carbon dioxide, I'm talking about *you*. And I'll show you what I mean.

Take a moment and look around you. Right now. Seriously. Wherever you are right now reading this, please stop... and *look around you*.

Seriously.

Go ahead,

Take a good look. I'll wait.....  
.....keep looking.....  
.....look *all* around .....

.....Ready?.....

What do you see? What ‘things’ make up your surroundings right now? What are you sitting on? What are you wearing? What about the building you’re in? Or are you outside? What are the literal, tangible *things* you are in contact with right now? Look closely and realize one very astounding fact: *Everything around us is a created thing, made as a thing out of creativity.*

*Let that sink in.*

***Everything around us is a created thing, made as a thing out of creativity.***

You may want to go back and look *again*. You may need to really let your reality sink in a bit. Everything around you is a created thing that was made out of a creative moment. Everything you see has a specific design, a particular aesthetic quality to it *on purpose*. Look closely enough and you’ll see it. Someone has *creatively* designed everything that you see.

The handle on your coffee mug. The concentric circles of your car stereo speakers. The curves of your cell phone. The color palette of your living room walls. Your office furniture. The pattern in your carpet. The subtle curves in your shoes. Your wedding ring. Your office printer. The soda machine in the hallway. Even your barista’s eye makeup.

*Every. Thing.*

Really want to have your head blown? Then put this next statement in your pipe and smoke it:

**There is not *one* creative activity or endeavor that is work.** Not one. You read that right. Circle it. Highlight it. Underline it. Memorize it. Heck, run out and tattoo it on your forearm if you have to. But whatever you do, if you get *nothing else* out of this book, remember this: Creativity is *never* work. And work is *never* creative.

Don't believe me? Then I've got a story to tell you.

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### Something Happened On The Way To A Real Job

As a kid growing up, Dad was gone a lot of the week with work and travel. Mom was busy with work and shuttling kids around. School, church, baseball, and whatever else was penciled in on the calendar we had hanging on the fridge...it was always something.

Saturday was 'clean the house day'. After breakfast, we routinely spent the morning cleaning rooms, washing clothes, changing sheets, bathing the family cocker spaniel, sweeping the garage, mopping the kitchen, dusting the shelves, vacuuming...all the things a 7-year-old boy hates.

What made it bearable was the old oak hi-fi stereo system in the den. A 200-lb home entertainment center (circa 1975) that housed an AM-FM stereo, an 8-track player, and a turntable that played round, vinyl discs known as 'records' at 33 RPMs. While we were busy doing chores, mom or dad would play these old records. All these sounds and stories would reverberate through the house while we cleaned. I loved it! It was the only way I could get through 'chore day' without whining. Little did I realize, all this music was forming the soundtrack of our lives.

We dusted to Elvis.

We mopped to The Beatles.

Vacuumed to Aretha Franklin.

Folded laundry to James Brown.

Cleaned bathrooms to Bill Withers.

Washed the dog to Chuck Berry.

Changed bed sheets to Johnny Cash.

We even cooked to Stevie Wonder.

The music would play, taking me away to another planet. Things like money didn't exist. There was no such thing as skin color. There was no fighting. No worry. No danger. It was a planet where all of life was celebrated and mourned. A planet where living consisted of feeling and exploring all its vibrancy. Where every range of emotion and human experience was validated, talked about, and celebrated. A place where even the despair and sorrow of 'the blues' felt like *play*.

Like many of you, I wrote songs as a kid. Growing up, we always had a guitar and a piano around our house. And I assumed everyone else did, too. I figured that it was completely normal for kids, even into their teens, to write songs and create melodies. I even assumed that everyone else my age was sitting at home, listening to the radio, and learning the Top 40 hits by ear like I was. (Boy, was I wrong!)

The summer after I turned sixteen, I spent a week at a camp n south east Texas. I don't remember the name of the camp or the lake it was on. What I *do* remember, however, was a seventeen year old boy with a guitar. I remember him sitting on the dock every night during free time, strumming chords and singing songs by the lake. *And I remember all the sixteen year old girls following him like a Pied Piper everywhere he went.* By the way, I came home that Saturday after camp and got serious about writing songs!

But as an adult, I never considered myself a 'real' songwriter or a

'real' creative. I had privately written little songs for many years, but never shared them with anyone outside the safety of a few close friends. It was just something I did for *fun*. You know, just when I was *playing around*. Nothing of any serious consequence. Somehow, I guess I felt that being creative wasn't a responsible, grown-up use of my time and energy. I struggled with my creativity for a long time, but finally gave in. Reluctantly, I locked it away, bolted the door, bought a coat and tie and became a 'grown up'.

Literally.

I *literally* locked it away.

I took all of my creative equipment and endeavors and locked them in my garage behind an oversized oak door. All my guitars, speakers, recording equipment, notebooks, painting supplies, journals, and song ideas piled up in my home studio. I convinced myself that I was moving on to more responsible things. To more stable and predictable things. To things that were a better use of my time and talents. And to things that were going to help me climb the ladder to some kind of corporate success and security. I could feel something new in my bones. I'd never really felt this way before, at least not like this. But I couldn't exactly put my finger on it. It was hard to describe. It felt strange. It felt unusual.

It felt like *death*. (I'm not even exaggerating here.)

I had gotten a job working in Dallas, Texas, in a brand new, fancy-schmancy office building. My family and friends were proud for

me. I had colleagues and old college buddies that were envious of my newly-acquired prestige. I got to rub elbows with ‘movers and shakers’, but I was dying inside. I missed my creative outlets. I missed spending time creating and experimenting and dancing with the Muse. Plus, I had to wear this stupid tie every day.

*Dear God, please kill me now.*

One Friday morning in May, we were huddled in the conference room of our office building. The executive director announced that we needed a theme song for an upcoming fundraising campaign. We were launching a really big push for fundraising in October and we needed something to get in the hands of our clients and members by late summer. The men and women around the conference room began tossing around ideas about music licensing and current hot artists we might try to negotiate with. They began dropping names and ideas and song titles, all the while I was wishing I was somewhere else. *Anywhere* else but sitting here drinking terrible coffee, surfing iTunes *and wearing a tie.*

Three chairs down from me, a co-worker named Robby yelled out to our executive director, “Hey, Jim, you know... Cottar plays the guitar. You should have him write a song!”

Jim peered at me over his bifocals.

"Is that true?", Jim asked. "You can do that?"

Everyone stared at me while the room got eerily quiet. My heart was pounding in my ears.

“Um..”, I said, embarrassed. “Sure...?”

Before I could mutter the words “*I think so...*” or “*I’ve never done any **real** songwriting before, so it’ll probably be terrible...*”, the conversation in the room moved on to budgets and activity zones and a lame PowerPoint presentation with pie charts. Evidently, this was a done deal. It had been decided: I would write a song, and the rest of the room would move on down the agenda to ... whatever items were next on down the agenda.

I’m not sure *exactly* what was next on the agenda, because my head was *swirling*. Not only had I been tasked with writing a song that my co-workers would actually hear, but a song that our company would be sending out to tens of thousands of people, all of whom were potential critics and judges. Anxiety set in.

I wondered if our clients would base their giving on the quality of my song. Would they give more or less depending on how much they were moved emotionally? Would my bosses crucify me if my song was terrible and we didn't meet our fundraising goals? More importantly, how devastated would I be if my song project was a flop and everyone knew it? I was sliding down a familiar rabbit hole of fear and inadequacy.

*Sigh.*

I was nauseous. But I was already committed, so I knocked off early that day and headed home. I had to get busy. Driving home I jotted down lyric ideas and made notes. I talked to myself in the car about the verse and chorus arrangements. I sang melody ideas over and over and over.

When I got to the house, I quickly explained to my wife what happened at the office that morning. I grabbed some fresh coffee and headed to my garage studio for the weekend. On Sunday night, I emerged from the garage with a demo called 'Reaching Texas'.

Early Monday morning, I was still nauseous. I snuck the demo into Jim's office before he arrived, and promptly hid behind my desk. I fully expected to receive an email from his assistant that read, "*Nice try, Sparky. Thanks for the effort, but after listening to your piece of crap song, we've decided we're gonna go with an actual songwriter...you know, someone with some talent...*"

I was certain everyone would know I was terrible. I was sure I'd be labeled as an imposter. I mean, I had never done anything like this before... not *for real*. I had only been *playing around*, writing for *fun*, not for anything serious. I felt like a fraud.

I waited. I checked my email every five minutes. Nothing. I waited some more. I checked again. And again. And then *it came*. After listening to my little song, the director sent out word to our entire

home office, as well as our satellites, calling it a *'home run'*. To my surprise, he was thrilled with it. He had the CFO promptly issue me a check to book some studio time and have it professionally engineered (by a man who once produced for Whitney Houston, no less!). It was then mastered, produced, packaged and distributed, along with video and promotional materials, to every client across the state. It was like the Universe had opened up a little creative window and whispered in my ear, *"Psst. Hey, Sparky. Watch this..."*

My creative journey was only beginning.

Or should I say, *re-beginning?*

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You Don't Work A Violin

When I heard Len Sweet utter those words, something inside me sat up.

"You don't work a violin."

Those five words tumbled off his lips like a slow-burning fuse on a

stick of dynamite. Something new happened inside me. It wasn't just my left brain making some kind of mental sticky note. And It wasn't my right brain gathering permission to fire up the creative juices. It was something in my core—in my *soul*— taking notice and tuning in. It was something being *lit*. Whatever part of me had given out, given in, or given up, was suddenly breathed into. I was awakened. *No duh, Sherlock. You play a violin.* If you want creativity and artistry— if you want beauty— you never get it from working hard.

You get it from *playing* hard.

My new-found truth was this: *All creative activity is play, not work.* I'd never even had that thought before. I'd never even considered the existence of that statement, much less that it might actually be true. So I began to look around and test it. I looked closely at the architecture of Michelangelo and Frank Lloyd Wright. I compared them with the Lego buildings of preschoolers at the daycare across my sidewalk. What I found was pure creativity, expressed in *play*.

I thought about the wildly-varied musical stylings of Johann Sebastian Bach and Bob Marley. Of Dave Grohl and Dave Mustaine. Of James Taylor and Taylor Swift. Willie Nelson and Bono. Tom Waits, Tom Morello and Tom Cottar. Elvis Presley and Elvis Costello. More creativity, and more play.

Now my mind was racing. What about fashion designers? Playwrights? Movie Directors? Novelists? Poets? Automotive engineers? Chefs? Tattoo artists? Jewelers?

From there on, ideas swirled. My mind exploded in exploration. I felt like I'd swallowed the Red Pill. *Twitter. Instagram. Facebook. Snapchat. Elon Musk. Bill Gates. Zuckerberg. Wozniak. And that guy on TV infomercials that sells flexible sealant in a spray can.*

It was *everywhere*.

Play. Play. Play. Play. Play. Play. Play. Play. Play. Play.

We all have creative play in our bones. We may have forgotten it, but it *really* is in our DNA. We call it a 'job' or 'work' when it really should be called *play*. Strip it all away and it's really very, very simple: *Creativity is play, not work*. But here's the rub: *Learning to allow yourself to play is hard work*.

Don't believe me? One October morning, I asked a preschool group of twenty 4-and-5-year-olds "How many of you can sing?". More than twenty hands went up. (Some of them enthusiastically raised *both* hands. That made me *smile*.)

The following morning I asked my daughter's class of 8-year-olds the same question. Out of twenty-two children, only 14 raised their hands. That afternoon, I asked my son's middle school band class the same question. Out of 36 students, *one* hand went up, and that one hand wasn't even my son. The following weekend I asked a group of 70 young parents the very same question. You know

what I got?

*Crickets.* I got the sad, empty sound of crickets. I got the sound that otherwise-confident adults make when they stare down at their shoes, hoping not to be noticed.

Dude. What *happened to us?* I know the worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt, but... *seriously?!?* This ought to make us ask some serious questions.

Like, "*What happens to our kids between 5 and 12 that they begin to lose their song?*"

Like, "*What happens to us as adults that makes us feel that creativity and play are frivolous?*"

Like "*Who told you that you can't sing? Who told you that you can't write? Who told you that you can't build or paint or draw?*"

Can you make noise with your throat? Then you *can* sing.

Can you hold a pencil and mark on a page? Then you *can* write and draw.

Can you hit a nail with a hammer? Then you *can* build.

Can you transfer paint from a can to a canvas or a wall with a brush? Then you *can* paint.

I whole-heartedly believe it just may be *your* creativity that changes the world. It's the Great Voice *you* have been given. And it's yours for the taking. It's yours for the *playing*. Unleashing your creativity isn't hard work, it's hard *play*.

I'll admit it may be scary. It may seem frivolous at first. Trusting your creative gift, learning to play again, can be a bit like uncovering buried treasure. In fact, Elizabeth Gilbert says:

*"...surely something wonderful is sheltered inside you. I say this with all confidence, because I happen to believe we are all walking repositories of buried treasure. I believe this is one of the oldest and most generous tricks the universe plays on us human beings, both for its own amusement and for ours: The universe buries strange jewels deep within us all, and then stands back to see if we can find them. The hunt to uncover those jewels—that's creative living."*

So start digging!

## SILENCING FEAR: MOVING FROM SAFETY TO BRAVERY

*"There's only two kinds of pain: The pain of discipline and the pain of regret.*

*Your choice."*

*-scribbled on the bathroom wall in a music shop.*

*"Expose yourself to your deepest fear; after that, fear has no power...the fear of freedom shrinks & vanishes. You are free."*

*— Jim Morrison*

One thing I learned from author Steven Pressfield is this: there's a secret that real creatives know that wannabe creatives don't know. It's that ONE thing that separates the '*one day I'm gonna...*' from the '*look what I did!*' Do it and you'll be like Neo after he took the red pill from Morpheus.

This is it: The secret that real creatives know and wannabe

creatives don't know is that it's not the creating part that's hard. It's the sitting down to create that's hard. And by that, I mean the *actual sitting down to create*. That's the hard part. In his book, *The War of Art*, Pressfield calls it *Resistance*.

At its core, it's known as Fear. Like a good little thief, Fear keeps us hiding in the shadows. It keeps us in a kind of psychotic loop—a holding pattern of procrastination. Fear supplies us with an ever-ready shopping list of excuses. The fear of 'doing it wrong'. Fear of failure. Fear of success. Fear of ridicule. Fear of comparison. Fear of *fear*. It's paralyzing. Crippling.

*It's exhausting.*

For months I wanted to start journaling again. I know myself well enough to realize that I'm a much happier person when I'm regularly writing, recording, or creating something. *Anything*. Many times, it doesn't seem to matter *what* I'm creating as much as the fact that I *am* creating. I'm less stressed. I treat people more kindly. I speak with more restraint. I think more clearly. I'm more organized. I'm less condescending. I'm more patient. I'm less cynical.

Put simply, when I'm creating, I'm in my Happy Place.

To put it bluntly, when I'm consistently flexing my creative muscle, I'm less of a jerkbag and more of the joyful, grateful, hopeful human God created me to be. The bonus is that those people closest to me, like my friends, my family, and my co-workers, are

happier to be around me because I'm not taking my creative repression out on them like some dog in a cage.

Clearly, I need the regular, consistent discipline and outlet of creativity in my life. Not haphazardly or sporadically, but on a daily basis. And yeah, deep down, I know that if I just *commit* to it, it would help my songwriting, help cage my Monkey Mind and generally help my life be happier and more productive. Yes, I *know* all this. It makes perfect sense. It is all completely and totally logical.

But fear is seldom logical.

So I kept making excuses. I began telling myself that I really didn't have the time. There were just too many things to be done in the mornings before work. There were kids to get ready for school. Lunches to be made. Showers to take. Homework to review. Coffee to be made. And, by the way, everyone who knows me knows I am *not* a morning person. *Do not disturb me until I'm fully caffeinated, thank you very much. I drink coffee for YOUR sake, not mine. You have been warned.*

So. You know those people that bounce out of bed first thing in the morning? The ones that sing in the shower and practically dance their way to work? Those people totally creep me out. *Weirdos*. I don't know what kind of space alien you people are, but *that ain't me*. Like, *ever*. In my world, the alarm goes off and I *moan* my way to the kitchen for coffee, then *drag* myself to the bathroom where I slowly and painfully commence to showering and shaving in complete darkness. All of this is done, by the way, *with my eyes*

*completely closed.* That is *literally* my preferred morning experience. Ugh. Sweet Baby Jesus, all I want to do is to slide back into bed and pull the covers over my head for fifteen more minutes.

And of course in the evenings I need to spend time with my family, right? There are always activities to attend, appointments to schedule, household chores to be done, soccer games to go to, band or track practice to shuttle kids from, and dinner to help with. And by the time the kids are asleep and the house is quiet, I'm ready to flop into bed or in front of the TV with my wife, exhausted from the day.

As I discovered, I wasn't fighting fatigue. I wasn't fighting my schedule or kids activities. I wasn't fighting against the dimensions of the workplace or how to manage my 'down time.' I wasn't even fighting against my lack of creativity.

I was fighting good ol' Fear.

One February morning when I decided to *actually* start journaling again, I bought several new fancy moleskin journals. New pencils that felt just right. I organized a space in my studio where I could write undisturbed-- where I could let the creative juices flow and dance with the Muse. I even spent an hour at the craft store trying to decide just which candle to buy... Or maybe I should buy incense. And if I buy incense, which kind? Cones or sticks? Sandalwood or something new?

I put a new bulb in my lava lamp. I printed off inspiring quotes about writing and hung them on the wall. I spent hours talking with friends about how excited I was to start writing again. I spent hours thinking about writing, I spent lots of money preparing to write. Weeks went by and I realized *I hadn't actually started writing*. Then, one afternoon I actually sat down and wrote my first journal entry.

"Wow. It's taken me 3 months to do this...how did that happen?..." I wrote, "How on Earth has it taken my this long to sit my happy self down and actually do what I planned on doing?"

*Fear.*

Fear was winning and I didn't even know it. I was fighting a battle I didn't know about, against an enemy I didn't even recognize. Tucked inside all the busyness and activities and decisions about what to write and when to write was Fear. I was sidetracked by its crafty, Houdini-like misdirection. Fear kept me swinging at shadows and never really hitting the target.

In all my busyness, I felt I never really had time to write or be creative. Which is a *lie*. It's like saying I don't have time to exercise. Or like saying I don't have time to cook a healthy meal, or shave, or make that phone call or schedule that meeting. I actually *do* have the time. We *all* have the time. The truth is that we all have the same number of hours in our day as Beyoncé or Oprah or Bill Gates. What we don't have is the same focus. What we don't have is the same commitment. Or the same *courage*.

*Anyone* can talk about being creative. Anyone can talk about writing. Anyone can talk about painting or drawing or building or sculpting or starting their own business. And boatloads of people do just that. They *talk* about it. They blog about it. Tweet about it, post about it, have coffee over it. Daydream about it. They just don't *do* it.

But you and I have the choice between the life we live and the life we long to live. We can live the life that's handed to us or we can create the life we dream of. American author Joseph Chilton Pearce is known for saying, "To live the creative life, we must lose the fear of being wrong." Overcoming creative fear must begin with losing the fear of *doing it wrong*.

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### Small Fear, Big Curiosity

Notice that this section is called 'Small Fear, Big Curiosity'. It's not called '*No Fear, Big Curiosity*'. And for good reason. While it's a lofty and honorable goal to try and completely banish your creative fear altogether, I just don't know of *any* successful creative who's done it. I've got some wicked-smart friends and I know a boatload of amazingly creative people—but I don't know anyone who doesn't still wrestle with a small dose of fear now and then. And in reality, fear can actually be a good thing, you know? I mean, fear reminds me not to step out into oncoming traffic. Fear keeps me from driving recklessly and skateboarding without a helmet. And it also helps me refrain from blasting that idiot on social media over his ridiculous political stance. So I don't want to get rid of it completely. A 'small fear' keeps my ego in check and keeps me physically and creatively healthy. And that's a good thing.

But fear doesn't rule the playground like some schoolyard bully. He may be there, running around with the rest of the class, but he's not allowed on the monkey bars, or the swing set, or the merry-go-round. Sure, I'll let him sit quietly in the sandbox. For now. But I'm keeping my eye on him.

Elizabeth Gilbert, author of the well known book "Eat, Pray, Love", published her first book "Pilgrims" in 1993 and has since been a prolific author and journalist. She remarked in her now-famous 2009 TED talk about her success of having Eat, Pray, Love made into movie. The fear that haunted her was the nagging thought "What if my greatest work is behind me?"

In 2015, she released "Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear". Barnes and Noble hosted a huge launch event the day it hit the stores. I've loved her work and followed her writing for a long time, so I watched eagerly as she took the podium to introduce the book and read a section of it to the crowd. However, I was *amazed* when she opened her speech with these words:

"This book just came out today... And I am really nervous. It is such a vulnerable thing to make a 'thing' and put it in the world. And it doesn't matter how many times you do it, it's a new experience every single time, and every single time it has a new outcome. And every single time it's scary. *But I have committed myself to let my curiosity be stronger than my fear.*"

My heart skipped a beat at that simple thought. *Let your curiosity be stronger and greater than your fear.* I mean, I always have fear, don't you? I'm always second-guessing and justifying and

negotiating... at least in my head. So, how do I practice letting my curiosity be greater, bigger—*stronger* than my fear?

For example, I have fears that my new song ideas will be terrible.

I have fear that I'm not as accomplished as a writer, musician, artist—or human being—as I need to be.

I have fear that I will write a book and it will be terrible and *no one* will buy it.

Or worse, I have the fear that I will write a book and it will be terrible and *everyone* will buy it and see how terrible it is.

*But what if my curiosity outweighed my fear?*

What if I put a dumb song idea out there and it's a *hit*? After all, no one ever would have predicted the success of "Who Let The Dogs Out"?

What if I wrote a book or poem and it *wasn't* so terrible? What if it touched someone or helped them make a positive change in their lives?

What if someone saw my drawings or paintings and it inspired

them to try drawing or painting for themselves?

More importantly, what if my creative vulnerability taught me that I could do something new and unexpected...and survive? Maybe even *thrive*? What if unleashing my creativity was more about who I became during the process of creating, and less about the *thing* I was creating? What if unleashing my creativity was *really* about unleashing *me*?

If any of that stuff was even remotely true, I was going to need a place where I could get my fear in check and learn to be brave.

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### My First Brave Place

I remember my first transition from a 'safe place' to a 'brave place'. I had written and performed a song titled 'One More Mile' for a local TV show featuring Texas songwriters. I was (and still am) a nobody in the 'Live Music Capitol of The World'. In a town that has housed legends like Willie Nelson, Townes Van Zant, Charlie Sexton, Janis Joplin, Jimmie Vaughan, Patti Griffin, and Stevie Ray Vaughan, I was in **way** over my head.

After taping, I was packing up and talking with a woman named Lee. "I really liked your song, Tom." she said.

"Thanks," I replied, "Uh...you're very kind..."

"No, I'm not..." she laughed. "Anyone who knows me will tell you just how blunt I am. But this song is really well done. You should come check out our songwriters group next Tuesday night. You'd fit right in. It's a *very safe place*."

"That sounds great!", I responded.

That was a total lie. It didn't sound great. Not at all. In fact, nothing could sound worse.

What could possibly be great about a rookie like me singing my pitiful songs for a group of experience songwriters and having them critique every word choice, every strum of the guitar, and every vocal inflection? *I'd rather shove sharpened pencils into my ears*. Fortunately, my wife overheard the conversation and hounded me to give it a shot. Always my biggest cheerleader, she wouldn't let me squander my new opportunity.

Reluctantly, I drove into south Austin the following Tuesday night, guitar in hand, to the Austin Songwriters Group. Sitting around the perimeter of the room were 26 other creatives like me. One by one, they each took their turn. They passed around copies of their song, subsequently performed it, and then sat back down to listen to the group's critique.

I was nervous.

I was sweating.

I had to pee.

And I thought I was going to vomit.

Now it was my turn. I passed around copies of a song I'd been working on called '*Someone*'. Even though it was just a rough draft, the song itself was pretty... terrible. I mean, it was *very* rough. I knew this was going to be horrible. For some reason, I felt like I was at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

"Hey, y'all. I'm new here, my name is Tom..." (Yes, I'm from Texas. We say *y'all*.)

"Hi, Tom..." they all responded in chorus.

"This is my first time here," I continued, "so... if this song *tanks*, you'll never see me again." They laughed. I laughed. I was joking...*sort of*. But it seemed to calm my nerves.

I performed my song as nervous sweat rolled off my forehead. My voice quivered. My hands shook. It was the longest three minutes of my life. When I finished, I sat down and fumbled with my guitar as I waited for their critiques to begin.

They began sharing their thoughts and criticisms. As they talked, I tried to listen. I couldn't hear very much over my own heartbeat pounding in my ears. Before long, I caught myself only *pretending to listen*. As my heart rate began to settle down and I wiped the sweat from my eyes, I had a breakthrough. I realized one, solitary, life-changing fact:

*I didn't die.*

Deep down, they could have really loved my song. Or they could have really hated my song. They could have laughed at my writing or my voice or my strum pattern, or word choices, or even any number of my insecurities. But the truth is *I survived*. As far as I could tell, they may have even like my song a little bit. But none of that really mattered in that moment. What mattered was that this 'safe place' had become a 'brave place' for me. And if you've never been there, I know it may sound silly.

"Of course, you didn't die."

"Dude, that's ridiculous."

"You're being totally absurd."

That's my point exactly. Most fear *is* absurd. It's unfounded and illogical. That's why conquering it is so simple! Actor Jamie Foxx has famously said, "You know what's on the other side of fear? Nothing." And he's right. There's nothing there. *Nothing*. Nada.

Zip. Zilch. Zero. And the more you do what you fear, the more you will move from 'safe places' to 'brave places'. Just try it. Walk through it. You'll make progress, I promise. It may not always be a straight path, but it *will* take you where you want to go.

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## Never A Straight Path

One summer, I got a gig playing music for a camp of high schoolers in Winter Park, Colorado. We spent 7 days in some of the most beautiful terrain in the country. Since I played music during the nighttime activities, I spent most of my daytime hours with a small team of leaders conducting 'adventure activities'. One afternoon we went white water rafting in Clear Creek. Another day was spent on a rope course and zip line campus. Still another day was spent downhill biking— whizzing down a barren ski trail on a mountain bike so fast our hair nearly caught fire. And more days than one, we were hiking and climbing mountains with our group.

As much as I loved all the rafting and biking and zip-lining, the hiking and climbing days were my favorite. I was a glutton for all the punishment it could dish out. Straining my muscles, learning to trust in my climbing partners, getting bruised from all the falling rocks, suffering from rope burns... all of it. At the end of the day, every muscle in my body ached from the strain. My chest and lungs were tired from working hard to breathe in the altitude. My hands and fingers were sore from grappling for rocks and roots as I ascended up the mountains.

*But the view was amazing.*

My calves were killing me. My abs and glutes ached. No matter how many bananas I ate each day, I suffered muscle cramps every night. The quadriceps in my legs hurt from working to defy gravity, from pushing away from the earth for hours upon end. My neck was stiff from constantly looking upward. And every bit of it was *glorious*. But to this day, there was one particular thing I hated: the 'switchback'.

*In hiking, a 'switchback' is a zig-zag route up a mountain. Instead of a straight path, a switchback trail will meander back and forth while it goes up. It protects both the mountain and the trail against excessive erosion and makes ascension easier for the traveller.*

While a route straight up the mountain is definitely shorter, it certainly wouldn't be safe for very long. With very much traffic and erosion, it would pretty quickly become impossible to use. And who wants a useless trail?? So, while I understand the need for a switchback—safety, utility, accessibility— I also pretty much hate it. Who wants to spend all day climbing a long meandering trail when a straight one would get me there in just a few hours? Not me.

My team and I would spend 30 minutes hiking up a trail, only to reach a point that it took a sharp turn downward to meander around a tree or boulder. We'd spend the next 15 minutes going *down* so we could find a spot that would let us begin going back up again. I was getting exhausted. And *frustrated*. We had committed to reaching the peak, so there was no giving up. No turning back. Every now and then we'd stop and rest, but not for long. We'd stop just long enough to drink a little water, chow down on a PowerBar, and catch our breath. I was afraid that if we stopped for too long, our muscles would tighten up and things

would get even harder. We'd work and strain and push ourselves to go higher and higher, and then... we'd hit *another* switchback. Groaning and complaining, we'd follow the trail around some obstacle and *descend again* until the trail twisted back upward. It was aggravating. It was disappointing.

There was lots of grumbling.

Going upward felt like *progress* and going downward felt like *regress*. Going up was what we wanted to do. It was why we were there in the first place! 'Up' was calling my name. 'Up' was the reason I was straining. 'Up' was the goal! Every time we hit a switchback, I was disheartened and felt like the wind was sucked right out of my sails.

*But the view was becoming amazing.*

Sometimes rock slides would come raining down unexpectedly on us. What seemed like millions of small rocks would pour down like an open fire hose from above the trail, pelting our heads and shoulders. The leader would yell "Rock!", and we'd immediately try to find protection in a crevice or behind a small tree trunk as the rocks whizzed past us. It was merciless.

*But did I mention the view?*

We hadn't gotten to the peak yet, but we'd already seen so much more than we'd expected. Our field of vision had been magnified

exponentially. Every time we'd hit a switchback in the trail, we'd be forced to see where we'd come from. Every view was different than the last one. Every vantage point was new. Every angle revealed something we'd missed earlier.

I could see our cabins from one of the turns. Until then, I hadn't even noticed the small creek that ran a few yards behind the campfire.

From one turn, I spotted a hint of a small town built along I-40 not far away.

From another, I noticed what seemed like an endless horizon of snow-capped mountain tops, and I wondered which ones we'd explore next.

The truth is that each one of those little switchbacks were what enabled me to see what I'd missed along the way.

After hours of hiking and climbing and squatting and pulling and *groaning* we reached the peak. It felt like we could see a thousand miles in every direction! Mountains. Trees. Snow. Beautifully quiet and serene and seemingly untouched by the rest of the world.

We stood in silence for a moment— and then we all *cheered* wildly! *Wooooooo!!! We made it! We actually made it!* I felt feelings of accomplishment and success I hadn't experienced before. I still don't have the words to adequately describe what our eyes saw. If

I were to show you a picture of that mountain and say, “I was there! Right on top!”, both the picture and the words would be wholly inadequate to describe what it’s like to stand on the peak after working so hard.

It’s beautiful. Scary. Peaceful. Satisfying. Graceful. Exhausting. Terrifying. Exhilarating. Wonderful. Intimidating. Humbling. And unforgettable.

All the straining and frustration, all the cramps and rocks, all the headaches (both physical and emotional) were completely worth the view. I'd do it again in a *heartbeat*.

Our creative journey is like that. It’s rough and achy. It’s beautiful and exhilarating. It’s rocky and disappointing one minute, but beautiful and graceful the next. Sometimes you climb straight up. Sometimes rocks come crashing down on you. And sometimes you climb up ten feet only to climb back down eight. Or *twenty*.

But that’s just the way it is. It’s a journey. It’s not about being the first one to the top, or the fastest one to the top. It’s about the journey. It’s about making progress. And progress is *never a straight path*. Even if it’s slow and steady. It’s about paying attention as our perspectives change and the horizon shifts. You know how sometimes you reach a peak and realize the path didn’t get you where you really wanted to go? And you realize what you *thought* was the right path led you to the wrong destination? Creatively, even *that* is a good thing. We’re all learning as we go. Even if we still question the journey.

"What if I look foolish?"

"What if I'm no good?"

"What if I'll feel like an idiot... and look like one, too?"

"What if people don't understand what I'm doing?"

"It feels arrogant to think that I could ever do that..."

"What if I don't have the right training?"

"What will people think?"

"What if I look like an **amateur**?"

That last one makes me laugh. I mean *really* laugh. At some point, I've felt and said every one of those statements, but the last one really strikes a nerve in me. I've felt like an *amateur* more than a few times, which I always thought of as a weakness. But the word *amateur* actually comes from the French word meaning 'lover'. So I figure that's a good thing, right? I mean, what's wrong with being a *lover* of music? What's wrong with being a *lover* of writing? Or a *lover* of carpentry? Or of dance? Or of programming? Or anything else for that matter? God help us all be amateurs of *all creative*

*things!* Until we take our collective dying breath, every single one of us should be *lovers* of creating and expressing, solving and designing, building and exploring! We should all be lovers of *play*.

If we're ever going to unleash our creativity, we have to begin asking different questions. We have to learn to ask the *right* questions. Questions that encourage, not discourage our creativity. Questions like:

*What if I didn't look foolish doing this? (Or at the very least, what if I didn't care how I looked?)*

*What if it turns out that I'm great at this?*

*What if I looked like I knew exactly what I was doing? What if I looked confident?*

*What if people applauded and revered what I was doing?*

*What if my creativity could spark something positive and creative in someone else?*

*Regardless of my training, why don't I just begin right now?*

*I don't know what people will think, but if they love it?*

*What if I really love what I'm doing?*

How are those questions different? How do those questions make you feel, as opposed to the first set of questions? Which ones encourage you to stay on the path? Which ones push you forward and which ones pull you backward? Which ones encourage you to explore and experiment? Which ones do you think the Great Creator is more likely to reward and make fruitful? Which ones inspire and motivate you?

If those were the kinds of questions we asked, the climb is easier to endure. It becomes exciting and adventurous. It pushes us forward, not backward. It calls us towards growth, towards the peak.

It pushes us upwards, where the view is amazing.

## FINDING YOUR TRIBE

"Birds of a feather, man."

-An unknown surfer I met on a ski slope in Winter Park, CO.

"You are only free when you realize you belong no place. You belong every place. No place at all. The price is high. The reward is great."

-Maya Angelou

It seems that musicians always know a handful of writers. And scrapbookers and quilters always know about famous chefs. Songwriters always seem to have author friends who are novelists and fiction writers. Painters and graphic artists seem to have friends who are into video game design. Fashion designers seem to know a lot of architects.

From a distance, it seems like coincidence. But the truth is that creative people are attracted to creative people. It just *happens*. How many times have you met someone and thought, "*There's something about her. I think we could hang out.*" As creatives, we see things differently. We express ourselves in certain ways. We give off a very specific vibe at times. We talk, see, think about and *feel* the world in ways others don't seem to get. We are artists, writers, scrapbookers, painters, carpenters, groupies, builders, decorators, remodelers, landscapers or a gazillion other things. *And we are fabulous.*

We can also be pretty insecure. We can be shy. And arrogant. We're often conflicted and emotionally beat ourselves up. We have longings. We are afraid. We have dreams and expectations. We are hopeless one minute and hopeful the next. As you're reading this, you may be nodding your head thinking, "*Dude. That's sooooo me.*"

Yeah. Me, too.

We recognize it in each other because we share the same creative spark in our spirit. It may be a different flavor of creativity (you may love to decorate and someone else may love to garden), but the spark is the same. We're part of some strangely beautiful and quirky *tribe*. At times we feel like we don't fit in to the rest of the Universe. Then, out of the blue, we bump into some stranger with that same creative spark, and the Universe sort of feels like home again. We feel less alone. Less alien. More empowered and courageous. We feel *energized*.

Creatives like me and you are like children that've been adopted into a wonderful, new family. We're already under the same roof. We share the same last name and have access to every toy our brothers and sisters have. But sometimes we're still not convinced we *really* belong here.

We are a lot like a kid I know named Caleb.

My friend Dan and his wife adopted Caleb, a rambunctious little boy with bushy, curly hair. Before coming to live with my friends, Caleb was rescued by state child protective services. Not only was his biological home physically abusive, but he suffered from malnutrition and neglect, and was often found hoarding food in the middle of the night. Even in the first few years of living with his new family he would hide food around the house and in his bedroom in case of emergency (i.e. he was abandoned, alone, and hungry). At a precious young age, he had already learned how to survive in an unstable world.

Caleb began having regular visits with a play therapist to monitor his development. The therapist would track his verbal and cognitive growth, his emotional development, and engage him in wonderful conversations about friends and school and other activities. After more than two years after his formal adoption date, Caleb stopped hiding food around the house. He stopped storing away snacks and juice boxes under his bed and in his sock drawer. When his parents mentioned it to the therapist, she was curious. At the next visit, she asked him why, all of a sudden, this 4-year-old wasn't hiding food anymore.

"Because Mr. Dan and Ms. Becky feel like my... *people*." he casually commented. "They're just like me."

*Out of the mouths of babes.*

I'm just like Caleb. As a teenager, I would stash away music and books and movies that resonated with me. I'd collect playlists, not necessarily of popular music, but of music that moved *me*. Books that changed *me*. Movies that revealed the Universe in ways *I* hadn't seen before. I would buy 'special editions' and boxed sets and extra copies of things. When I came home from on holidays, my first stop was to share my treasures with my brother, Shae.

"Have you heard this?!?"

Or:

"Hey, have you seen The Big Lebowski?!? O my gosh! That scene where such-and-such happens and then Jeff Bridges says yada yada yada...? Oh my gosh, man. That whole movie is SO my life right now!"

Or:

"Here...listen to this...It's the new Dream Theater album. Track 4... listen..."

Or:

"Dude. Have you read Kerouac's "On The Road" yet? No?!? Well, here. Check this out... on page 217, he says..."

Shae and I would spend the next several hours (or more) in the car or the bedroom talking about the latest books we'd read, movies we'd seen, or music we'd run across. Playing songs and mouthing the lyrics for emphasis at just the right places. We'd be quoting movies and waving our hands around like Marlon Brando or Brad Pitt or, yes... even The Great Lebowski. The lyrics were invigorating. The quotes were inspiring. On the outside we were swapping CDs, but inside there was something more going on. Our hearts were pumping with adrenaline and our minds were racing. He was and is my first tribe. Thirty years later, I still stash those kinds of things to share with him.

Later on, I ran across a few more people with the same tribal bent. Not many, but a handful. A cartoonist. A pastry chef. A guitarist. An insurance agent. A book store manager. A biker. An Army Sergeant. A novelist. And a bartender.

These days, thanks to ever-expanding technology and social media, I'm blessed to be connected with a larger tribe that is still growing. I've developed an ever-growing email list of Tom Cottar Music Tribe members, built an online community around this book, connected with various songwriters groups, turned Facebook friends into real-life friends, and more. I've driven hours to meet a stranger I met on social media for coffee. I've reached out to service clubs, city offices, school art teachers, veterans organizations, and hospital workers all in an effort to not only *find* my tribe, but to *build* my tribe. Why? Because as a creatives, we

need more than a 'club' to belong to and a Facebook page to 'Like'. We need people in our lives who have *our* blood running in *their* veins. People who feel the same vibe in a piece of music or the same emotional power in a work of art. The same excitement over a beautifully written piece of computer code. Or the same thrill in a gourmet steak. *That is a tribe.*

I know many creatives who support other artists, yet still believe "I could never do that." They're too intimidated or afraid to become artists themselves. Or they may not even realize they have artistic aspirations. They'll often tell other creatives, "I'm your biggest fan." Some even chose careers close to the arts or parallel to them, but never actually *in* them. Like the movie critic who longs to be pursuing a career in directing or writing movies. Or the local DJ who has the heart of a songwriter. Or a school drama teacher who still dreams of auditioning for Broadway. Those people long to be *part* of the tribe, because they are wired to be *in* the tribe. They need us. And we need them.

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## Six Reasons Why I Need My Tribe

**1. We give each other *emotional support*.** They listen to me through my struggles and help me process how to move forward. It doesn't matter if it's a relationship issue, a time management problem, or if I'm working on a new song idea and get stuck in Second Verse Hell. Coming from another creative, their support is incredibly potent. They don't downplay my struggles. They 'get me'. And I 'get them'. So we rely on each other.

**2. They are a source of *motivation and inspiration*.** Someone tells you they admire and appreciate you and your work. You get encouragement to create more and do better. Again, this is particularly powerful when it comes from someone whose taste you respect, or someone who *really* knows what they're talking about. Some of my most trusted sources of motivation are other artistic, creative people who've taken the time to thoughtfully critique my work. They're gentle and kind and generous... and *honest*. There's a sense of mutual respect for our creations—and a mutual expectation that we are all striving to create our best work.

**3. We give each other great *feedback*.** Those of us who've created something from our heart—from our innermost being—and have hung it out for the world to see, know one thing deeply: We know how to give and receive feedback. Gently. Thoughtfully. Honestly. Encouragingly. Without fail, someone in my tribe says just the right thing to give me a thoughtful and useful response to my work, and how to make it better. Sometimes it's my wife, who knows me better than anyone, and sometimes it's another creative who just says, "Hmmm....yeah, but...what if you did \_\_\_\_\_ instead? I'd be interested to see what that would look like."

By the way, *be very cautious* about listening to feedback that comes from outside your tribe. When you put your creation out into the world, you'll be sure to *get* feedback, but that doesn't mean you have to *receive* it. Remember: everyone is a critic. Some are well-meaning friends who will love everything you do. Some are people who don't understand or 'get' you. And some are critical, jealous, frustrated creatives themselves.

When I receive feedback from the latter group, I simply respond by saying something like, “Hmmm. That’s an interesting perspective. Thank you so much for that.” Then I promptly move it to the trash bin in my mind and hit ‘erase’. It may sound cold and egotistical, but let me assure you, if you’re insecure as a creative, you’ll listen to a thousand different voices telling you a thousand different things... hoping, praying, practically *begging* to know which one to believe. The simple truth is I need to trust the voices in my tribe above the voices outside of it. Some of those outside voices may, in the end, be right about their opinion. But first I need to trust my tribe.

*(A side note here: Be cautious and don't be afraid to move slowly in building your tribe. It's ok to be selective. Remember, it's a whole lot easier to keep the crazy out of your house, than it is to clean it up once they've moved in. I'm speaking from experience here.)*

**4. A tribe makes for great collaboration.** I can’t tell you how many times someone in the tribe gets involved with me on a project. We may talk about ideas, word choices, stories, lyrics, colors....anything. In my tribe, I have computer whizzes, artists, painters, t-shirt designers, mechanics, programmers, stylists, ranchers, secretaries, parents, coaches, pastors, atheists, writers, monks, bartenders, and construction workers. The stories and experiences we share are *unending*. And any of them— all of them— are amazing collaborators. Whatever we make together is exponentially more than what I could ever make alone.

**5. We keep each other accountable.** When I get in a funk of depression or laziness, someone in my tribe cares that I get off my butt and get things done. Someone cares that I keep writing,

playing, singing, emailing, or whatever I'm supposed to be doing. And I care enough not to let them down. Now and then I'll get a text or a message on social media that says, "Hey, man. I haven't seen you at our songwriter circle in a while. You should come out next Tuesday." It's a gentle reminder saying "Hey, dude. Don't you dare quit on us. We love you. You need to get up and get going."

And I do.

**6. Most importantly, a tribe give us a place to belong.** It gives all of us a place and platform do to something that matters to each of us. It gives me a place that matters. A place I belong. It gives each of us the space and the glue to be connected to passionate, creative, and supportive people. It reminds us that we are not alone. It reminds us that we matter and that our work matters.

Years ago, I had an intern named Duggie who spent the summer in Senegal, Africa. As a college football player, Duggie was a huge, beast of a young man with long hair, a big beard, and an even bigger, gentler heart. He was an imposing tackle on the football field, but a compassionate, kind-eyed giant off the field. After weeks in Africa, he returned home with one mantra: ubuntu. Ubuntu is an African word used to describe a community or a tribe. Literally, 'ubuntu' it means *I am because we are*. In other words, I am who I am because you are who you are and, more importantly, because we are who we are *together*. We adopted his mantra and printed bracelets and t-shirts, made posters and videos, and decided to fully embrace the concept of 'ubuntu'. Today, Duggie is still one of my most cherished friends in the tribe. I am who I am because we are who we are.

*That*, my friends, is what belonging to a tribe is all about.

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## The Tribe Helps Us Grow

The bottom line is this: *my tribe helps me grow*. And I help them grow. Who you are and what you will become depends on who you surround yourself with. Jim Rohn puts it this way: "You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with." In a tribe, it doesn't stop with just those five. Ubuntu literally reaches into every corner of your community. And it helps us grow.

Think of the artist in you as a child that must be nurtured. That child needs a tribe that makes his heart soar and his eyes sparkle. He needs a tribe that fills his wings with air and his head with ideas. The Child needs to feel safe to run and grow and stretch and experiment. That's how your creative Child learns.

The Critic from outside the tribe will tell you to keep your head down and don't give in to such silly ideas. The Critic will tell you to be reasonable. To be logical. To be safe. To go along and blend in. But blending in doesn't help your Child grow, and it certainly never helped change the world. Beware the Critic, my friends! His goal is to *keep* you from growing. To stifle you, not encourage you. To retard your growth, not aid it. The artist-child in you needs to stretch and learn just like the artist-child in me needed to stretch and learn. The hard truth is I didn't know I needed to grow until it was forced on me. Aren't all children this way?

Someone has said '*you don't know how much you don't know*

*until after you know it*'. That's pretty much what happened to me when I realized I needed to learn some basics from my tribe. And I mean, *the basics*. Silly things that I never paid attention to. Silly things I assumed I had covered already. Like learning to say 'thank you'.

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## THANKS FOR THE MELODIES

Like many of us, it's awkward for me to receive compliments. Are you that way? When someone compliments me, I get really uncomfortable. Anxious. Itchy. I start backpedaling and justifying things. I'll try to beat others to the punch by pointing out my own flaws and mistakes before they get a chance to do it. That way it doesn't sting so much when someone else does it... Smart, huh? Or I'll start minimizing their compliment, like it's really nothing to be complimented for--which really makes the complimenter feel stupid for even bringing it up. Aaaaannnddd then I feel like a jerk for making their effort seem stupid. \*sigh\*

For instance,

THEM: "Hey, I really like that new shirt."

ME: "Oh. Um... well. I think my wife picked it out... I think she found it on sale somewhere... but..."

Or,

THEM: "Oh, hey. By the way, that blog post was really great. It really resonated with what I'm going through at work."

ME: "Oh... Um... cool... I'd heard something on the radio about conflicts at the work place... it gave me an idea about something else I'd heard... and..."

Or even,

THEM: 'Dude! That guitar solo is killer! I love it, man! When you were playing, me and my buddies were like, 'Woooo!!!!!!'

ME: Oh...haha... cool. Yeah, I didn't really nail the arpeggio like I wanted to and that next to last bend was a little pitchy, so... I really had a hard time getting back to the main riff after that... I just really flubbed it... but.... um... yeah...."

Ugh. Why was it so awkward? Why was I such a putz sometimes when it comes to compliments? Why couldn't I just..... *relax* about it all?

Because my creative artist-child didn't feel valid. He didn't feel *worthy* of compliments. He didn't feel like a *real* artist/writer/musician/whatever. It doesn't matter if it's something we paint, something we build, something we do, something we bake, knit, say, or wear, insecurity rears its ugly head and cripples us. The critic in our head looks up from his recliner and says, "I told you so...". And we stumble. We doubt. We second-guess our gifts and our calling. We go limp like a bowl of noodles.

When those things happen, remember this one very specific truth: *it takes help to grow*. That's what our tribe is for. We need tribesmen and women that understand us, that 'get' us. We need moments that affirm and encourage and validate us, but we also need the tribe to push us down the path. You know how the story goes... "*One day, I was walking down the street minding my own business, when all of a sudden... my friend, Kate, taught me a lesson I'll never forget.*"

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## THE WORD WOMAN

See, my friend Kate Howard is a beautifully talented singer, songwriter, poet, artist, and professional organizer. We met one cold night in January after I performed 'One More Mile' for a group of songwriters. During the performance I spotted her watching me, completely tuned in to my story and song. At the break, she came up and introduced herself.

"I'm Kate", she introduced herself with a huge smile. I stuck out

my hand.

"Hey, Kate. I'm Tom... I don't think we've met, have we?"

"Nope. I just wanted to introduce myself and tell you I really enjoyed your song." She was enthusiastic and sincere, grinning as she spoke. "It really moved me... I truly *loved* it."

*Uh, oh. Here I go...*

"Oh... Um... well? Uh... good.", I said, staring at the floor. "I mean, I really struggled with the second verse, you know? Making it fit and all.. And that line about 'ten resumes and ten rejections'? That wasn't too cheesy was it? Too predictable? And the bridge was kinda long... but I hope it worked well enough... But, yeah. And I really struggled with that last part about the ..."

She held up her hand and cut me off in mid-sentence. I just stared at her.

"The words you are looking for," she said, "are THANK YOU." Her eyes smiled at me.

"Um..." I stumbled, not sure what to say. "Well... yeah. You're right. I just have a hard.... um.... a hard time knowing... what to say, you know... when people, um... because I'm pretty new to all this,

and.....”

She held up her hand again and looked me in the eyes. I stared at her, grinning nervously. I didn't know what to say.

But she just *told* me what to say...*And she was right.*

"....thank... you...", I responded.

The words fell heavy off my tongue like bricks on the floor. Followed by this complete, dead silence. Like, *morgue* silence. I was staring down at my shoes and the hideous conference room carpet.

When I looked up, my eyes began to tear. Kate smiled proudly at me. Her generosity of a tiny compliment taught me a life-changing lesson. In a flash I realized the power of 'thank you'. In her kindness, Kate *helped* me more than she knew, and I was indebted to her more than she knows. (Although, by the time you read this, I've already told her... so, *now* she knows.)

It was validating.

It was affirming.

It was *help*.

*It was growth.*

In a moment, she taught me that it wasn't her compliment that validated my work. It was my 'thank you'.

It was my 'thank you' that solidified her compliment. More than that, my 'thank you' identified her as my people. My 'thank you' that helped me find *my tribe*.

## BUILDING ESCAPE VELOCITY

You know those pictures of earth that are taken from space? The ones where Earth looks like a blue and green ball against the blackest background ever? I'm fascinated by those pictures. They always give me a sense of awe and wonder. I look at the huge, vastness of space and think of our tiny little solar system. Then I see our teeny tiny little planet. And then I think about how itsy-bitsy, teenie-weenie I am. And *then* I start to notice the millions of stars in the picture—way too many to count. It reminds me just how small I am and how *huge* our universe is. It reminds me how sometimes the oldest things we know, like the planets, the sun, and the stars, are some of the most mysterious and magical things in our lives. But it also reminds me that somebody went to a lot of *effort* to show us something. And I'm not talking about some metaphysical idea of God. I'm talking about somebody human.

Actually, it was a *team* of somebodys. Astronauts. Mathematicians. Scientists. Engineers. Technicians. They all worked together to build a rocket or shuttle powerful enough to get out there so someone (or *something*) could take a picture. That rocket had to be powerful enough to overcome gravity and escape the Earth's gravitational pull and atmosphere. Physicists call it *escape velocity*. Put simply, *escape velocity is the minimum speed needed for an object to escape from the gravitational influence of*

*a massive body.* Despite the detailed formulas of kinetic energy and gravitational potential energy, the outcome is spectacular. To those watching from the sidelines of Cape Canaveral Air Force Base, it's beautifully simple: the countdown hits zero, a guy in a white coat presses a button, and a massive engine thrusts a rocket into space on top of a powerful blast. Zoom!

A few hours later, some lucky mortals in space suits are taking pictures of the beauty and majesty of the Universe. They have a certain vantage point that we'll never have. They see the stars and the moon and the earth in a unique way. And their pictures can leave us breathless.

OK. It's confession time.

As a creative, I've struggled to find a way to blast off into creative 'space'. I've struggled with balancing 'real world' responsibilities with following my creative passions. I always felt that if I could achieve enough *escape velocity*, I could both maintain my real world responsibilities *and* chase the creative stars. And like most of us, I've found it difficult and overwhelming to try to juggle my creative desires with 'real life'. After all, who has time to pursue painting, writing, building, cooking, drawing, dancing, or coding among the more responsible, adult activities of working, paying bills, folding laundry, mowing the lawn, doing dishes, meeting with the boss, commuting, fixing the car, raising kids, attending soccer games, driving to band concerts, volunteering at the food pantry, attending church, and teaching your 16-year-old how to drive? Definitely not me. I don't have that kind of energy. Geez. I'm tired just from making that list...

In a moment of under-caffeinated weakness and frustration, I turned to all the self-help books available online and at the big-box retailers. Big mistake. I got lost in an unending river of books with titles like “How to Have All The Time You Want”, and “How To Work Smarter, Not Harder”, and “How To Have Your Best Life Now”.

Talk about *depressing*.

I’m no genius, but I’m smart enough to know that there’s *never* more time than 24 hours in my day, that I need to work smart *and* hard, and that I can’t have my ‘best life now’ if I’m spending it holed up somewhere reading all these books! I’d be *wasting* my best life now! And yes, I realize that each and every one of those books probably has *some* measure of merit in it. Some nugget of benefit. Some good and helpful practices and insight. And I’m sure they’d utterly *transform* my life... if I was a monk and lived in a cave with no distractions from work and family and social media. So if that’s YOU, I wholeheartedly encourage you to put this book down and go do just that. Seriously. And I wish you all the best in your creative endeavors. Go. Right now. Be fruitful and multiply.

But if that’s *not* you—if you *don’t* live in solitude in a cave somewhere, if you have a real job and real adult responsibilities, and a *life*, and you still have a yearning to be more creative and pursue something new and exciting but don’t know *how* to make it happen— read on. Because I believe you can do it by making a handful of intentional choices I’ve learned to make... and still *live your life*. The difference is you’ll be living a more creative, mindful, and fulfilled life because you’ll learn to see things differently and

focus on doing what's important. Not just fill your days with activity.

For me, it took a small *team* of helpers to help me achieve the *escape velocity* I was looking for. Like the team of scientists and mathematicians and wicked-smart physicists that helped propel our astronaut into space where she could get those amazing pictures, that astronaut didn't get there by herself. She had an *awesome* team working behind the scenes—way before liftoff ever occurred—to make everything happen. That's what I had to build. It wasn't complicated, but it was absolutely necessary. I needed to make a handful of wicked-smart decisions to get me beyond what was pulling me in conflicting directions. I had to have a small *team* of the right ingredients to achieve *escape velocity*.

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## Learn Your Alphabet

The first and most basic thing I had to do learn the alphabet. More specifically, I had to learn the 14th and 15th letters of the alphabet. Go ahead.... I'll wait while you count it out. You're probably reciting the alphabet in your head and counting on your fingers until you get to... ahhhh, there they are... the 14th and 15th letters. So simple. So obvious. It's like God Himself put them *right next to each other* so we wouldn't forget them. But sadly, we still forget.

As a toddler, the word 'no' is one of the first words we learn. Why? Because that's what we're constantly being told! We reach for things, climb on stuff, put foreign objects in our mouth, fearlessly head for the stairs... all while our parents are shouting '*No!*', '*No!*', '*No!*', '*No!*' at every turn. *Put down that glass ornament! Get off that kitchen table! Don't put that dog food in your mouth! Get away*

*from the stairs!* It's no surprise that the word 'no' is one of the first three words a child learns to say. It's a powerful word. But as adults, we seem to forget it. And we forget the *power* of those 14th and 15th letters. By the way, here's a little pro tip I hope you already know: Saying 'no' to certain things is the only way to say 'yes' to important things. Or to put it another way: *you can't reach for the stars until you reach for the shears. You gotta prune.*

Let's be honest here. Most of us are really nice people. We like being around others. We like being *liked by others*. We like being needed for things. And we genuinely enjoy helping and giving and being a resource to others, even when it's not necessarily to our benefit or profit.

Personally, I really enjoy meeting new people and making new friends. That's one of the things I love about traveling and performing—every crowd is different and new. And if you know me, you probably know that I'm an introvert, but I'm not shy. For me, meeting and engaging with people drains me of energy, and the only way I recharge my batteries is by being alone. Extroverts, on the other hand, feel energized by being around people and can feel drained or weary when they have to spend time alone. But as an introvert I have to carefully monitor my time/energy supply so I can give my best attention to the things that matter most. Simple. But not easy.

For years, I would feel awful if someone called me up to get together for lunch or coffee and I turned them down. I'd feel guilty. I'd be afraid that they'd think I was too egotistical or too snobby to make time for them. I'd wonder if they'd talk badly about me to other friends I'd gotten together with. What if they thought I didn't like them? What if they *really* needed a listening ear? What if...?

What if...? What if...?

*Sigh.* I'd be worn out from the mental and emotional boxing match I had with myself over just *considering* saying 'no'.

Am I completely neurotic? Maybe. But learning how to use the 14th and 15th letters of the alphabet wisely has helped me give my best creative energy to things that are most important. Surprisingly, when I explain to friends or coworkers, "*I'm sorry, but no. That sounds like a really interesting project, but it's not something that I can give 100% to. I just have other things that require my time and energy. But I'm honored that you'd ask me...*", their response *wasn't* hatred towards me. They didn't slander me on social media (at least, not that I know of!). They didn't burn my house or threaten my family. They simply *respected* my response and moved on.

Except for times when they didn't.

Truthfully, there have been times when someone got their panties in a wad over my 'no'. They felt hurt or rejected or just plain aggravated that I didn't take the time or energy to jump on their bandwagon or give away my time to them. And I sincerely felt awful about it. *Awful.* I felt guilty and worried and terrible when some of them were dear friends. Their anger with me made me feel pretty horrible. But typically, within a few days one of us would call the other and say, "Look, I'm really sorry. It's not personal. I love you and value our friendship. But right now, I just *can't.*" And we'd move on. Together.

And those that didn't get over it? They've moved on, without me. And that's OK. I wish them only the best in their endeavors. The world needs them just as it needs you and I. We *all* have a place. And I'm grateful for that. I'm happy about that. And I'm *hopeful* because of that.

Hooray for me. And hooray for the letters N and O. What would I do without them?

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Pruning the Vines.

*Before you reach for the stars, you've gotta reach for the shears.* After we've learned how to use the 14th and 15th letters of the alphabet, now it's time to prune.

I know people who think they are Superman. Or at the very least they want me to *think* they are Superman. They have significant roles and responsibilities at work. They're active in their family life, coach soccer, serve as president of the band boosters, teach a Sunday School class, post pictures of their amazing garden on Pinterest, talk about the '69 Camaro they are rebuilding in their garage, hit the gym at 4am every morning, and still find time to remodel their own kitchen and build a deck in the neighbor's backyard.

Dang. If I'm honest, those people make me feel like a slug. Like I'm not pulling my weight in the world. You want to know how those people can accomplish so much? Want to know how they've achieved Superman (or Wonder Woman) status?

I think the reality is that one of three things may be happening:

1. They are currently over-extended and are about to crash *big time*.
2. They are projecting an image of themselves and their lives that may not be quite as accurate as it is in reality.
3. They've learned the secret of energy management and the art of pruning.

Or, put another way:

1. They might be Superman. But they're headed for Kryptonite, for sure.
2. They're only Clark Kent. Not Superman.
3. They really *are* Superman.

If they're *really* accomplishing all those things, and if they don't seem to be imploding from burn-out, chances are that it's #3. Oh, we can do all kinds of things, with all kinds of energy and enthusiasm, for about a minute or two. But we can't do *everything*, all the time. We have to prune.

Creativity and productivity go hand-in-hand. And because creativity and productivity are cumulative, by pruning things OUT of our lives, we can begin to achieve a kind of forward momentum. Every choice you make to say 'yes' to something is a choice to say 'no' to something else. To put it another way, every choice you make to prune something out of your life is a choice to give room for something new and creative to bloom in your life. It's like my dad always told us as kids: *"You can have anything you want, but you can't have everything you want."* That's pruning in a nutshell.

And every country boy knows that if something isn't pruned, it produces less and less fruit, not more. Eventually it ends up producing no fruit at all.

Let's be honest. Pruning is not only hard, it hurts.

It hurts to think I have to let go of something I love. Or something I'm emotionally invested in. Or something that makes me feel validated. And sometimes I find myself holding on to things because they give me an identity. They give me purpose. But pruning is a prerequisite for growth. Just as the young, fruit-bearing branches on a vine must be pruned back in order to provide needed nutrients to the whole plant, my life needs to be pruned back from time to time. I had to learn to identify the activities in my life that seemed to be providing good results in the short run, but were decreasing my effectiveness in the most critical areas of my life.

For example, I had convinced myself that laying around and watching Netflix was the best way for me to relax. I realized that

while I was 'relaxing', my mind was still swirling with activity, thoughts, wishes, and to-do lists. It was my way of procrastinating. As a result, when I sat down to do my creative things, I *still* had all those things swirling around my head, with very little mental white space to create in.

In search of maximum fruit, I became painfully choosy about projects to work on. I passed up some projects that seemed exciting. Projects that didn't need me to be successful—they would be successful projects with or without me.

I declined a handful of opportunities to partner with some very talented and creative people so I could pursue the fruit I wanted.

I turned down some co-writing opportunities with some very smart and witty writers.

I let go of some performing responsibilities that I enjoyed but had begun to become redundant and unproductive.

I learned to play the long game with my creative energy and not focus on short-term busyness.

I had to prune. As you begin to craft your life and make decisions about what to act on versus what to abstain from, you'll begin to see the 'negative space' beginning to develop. The emptiness. The blank nothingness. The time between activities when ideas begin to form, melodies and patterns begin to germinate, insights

appear, and your overall creativity begins to *marinate*.

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*Creative Elbow Room*

Ah, but here's the rub. Creativity by definition is built on *change*. It involves something *new*. In fact, it's been said that creativity is the *ultimate rebellion*. Let that sink in a minute. While there are a boatload of people on this planet who despise change, you and I are actually attracted to it. We're creative people, me and you. Which means our Achilles' heel is that we love change so much, we love 'new' and 'fresh' so much, we can get bogged down in too many things that vie for our creative energy. We're gluttons for change. The problem is when it begins to fill up every crack of our lives. All the new things we've started begin to pile up until the day we wake up in a frazzled, burned out, scattered mess and realize all our creative energy has been diverted away from the things we most want to accomplish. Instead of feeling stretched, we wind up feeling overwhelmed.

As Todd Henry says in his book "The Accidental Creative":

"New opportunities, new projects, new ways to expend our energy. Distractions. Temptations to divert our resources or attention. Many of these "sprouts" are very good things. But for some of us, these little opportunities continue to pile up until every crack of our life is full. Soon these very good but nonessential distractions are diverting our energy away from the tasks that are really crucial to

our productivity and momentum. This is the beginning of a downward spiral of productivity, and it stems from a lack discipline around where we choose”.

Raise your hand if you've been *there*.

*Sigh.*

Yeah. Me, too.

Whether you're a 'professional 'creative' trying to strengthen your creative muscle or just someone exploring your creativity while juggling your day job, your family responsibilities, and working your side hustle, I will tell you this: Start pruning *now*.

*Now* is one of my favorite words. Just ask my kids. I firmly believe the time to do something is not when it's easy, or when it's convenient, or when it's popular, or when it feels right. The time to do something is the moment you know it needs to be done. The moment you realize a change is needed, you make that change. You make it *now*.

"Dad, it's my night to do the dishes. When should I do them?"

"Now."

"Hey Dad, there's glass in the driveway. When should we sweep it up?"

"Now."

"I've got a science project due Friday. When should I start working on it?"

"Now."

"I'm overloaded at work. When do I start letting go of stuff?"

"Now."

Yes, it's hard. Yes, it's inconvenient. And yes, you'll face Resistance from that boatload of people around you who don't like change. Just take a deep breath and smile. They'll adjust. And so will you.

Pruning is hard work. But the reward is great.

Years ago, one of my full-time jobs was working with middle school and high school students. I was responsible for programming, teaching, organizing events, and training adult volunteers to work with 150 hormone-driven teens. It was a year-round frenzy of activities, road trips, projects and studies. And it occupied almost all of my waking hours. Even with a family and small kids, it consumed the vast majority of my creative time and energy.

A few years into it, I started doing some music on the side: writing, performing, leading worship, and dipping my toes into the recording world. I started traveling. Performing out of town at camps and coffee shops. Trying my best to bring a little hope and light to festivals and dives. It was exhilarating, but with family responsibilities, a wife and three kids, and a full-time job, I was drowning in over-commitment. I desperately needed to prune some things out of my responsibility, but I had no one to delegate to. I couldn't just cut things out and leave them with no one to follow through on. That wasn't fair to the students and my integrity was more important than that. So, what was I going to do?

In a moment of clarity, I ran down to a local craft store and bought a large, cheap, black picture frame, a silver Sharpie, and a new package of small, neon-colored Post-It notes and gave birth to my new system. What I would later call the life-saving "C.h.I.M.P.S. of Freedom":

C - Creative satisfaction

(h)

I - Intellectual growth

M - Mental/Emotional health

P - Physical well-being

S - Spiritual health

(By the way, the 'h' in ChIMPS doesn't stand for anything. I just stuck it in there because... well... because without it, it would be called CIMPS. And *that's* just silly.)

With my silver Sharpie, I slowly and deliberately wrote those words along the sides of the picture frame in big, bold, determined capital letters. I read them aloud as I wrote.

*CREATIVE.*

*INTELLECTUAL.*

*MENTAL.*

*PHYSICAL.*

*SPIRITUAL.*

After I hung it above my desk, I decided to write all my responsibilities and obligations and activities down on sticky notes. Teaching. Writing. Training adults. Training for the Austin Marathon. Taco Tuesdays. Coffee Club. Coaching soccer. Improving my guitar chops. Attending conferences. Shopping for groceries so I could help feed some of our local at-risk kids.

The list went on. And on. And on. If the sticky note matched up with one of the five words on my frame, great! It went inside the frame and would be stuck on the glass as a reminder of its importance to my life and growth as a creative and well-balanced human being. But if not, it stuck to the wall *outside of the frame* as a reminder that someone else in the universe was going to have to handle it. That it would continue to be my responsibility for now, but very soon I would literally hand that sticky note to someone and say, "*Here you go, Chico (or Chica). This is yours now. Live long and prosper.*"

As you can imagine, my frame was completely filled with sticky notes! Everything from '*do your quiet time*' to '*hit the gym*' to '*drink more water*' to '*date your wife*' to an inside joke that said '*This is not a pony ride!*' shouted at me from neon yellow bits of paper. It was beautiful. These were my ChIMPS. These were the things I *must* give time and energy to. These things were the ones that only I could do. These things matter above all else. Now it was clear: when someone asked me to take on a project or assignment, I could look at my ChIMPs and know 'Does this fit?' If it did, I could take it on. But if not, I could point them to the black frame and say, "I'm sorry. That's really not something I can do right now."

Ahhhh, I do love the smell of creativity in the morning.

What was shocking was the trail of neon yellow paper encircling my frame. I was overwhelmed. *Holy scraps, Batman*. There were easily twice as many notes outside the frame as there were inside the frame. I had no idea how much pruning I needed to do. But little by little, I began to notice people around me who could help me prune my commitments.

In the following weeks, I'd hear someone say, "Man, I wish someone had told me about raising a teenage girl through puberty! I sure have learned a *ton* about 13-year-old- girls this year!", and I'd jump on them with a sticky note that read *parents of teens* and say, "You should join our team!"

I'd get an invite to a conference or event and stare up at my ChIMPs and think, "Do I *really* need to give up a whole week?"

I'd receive an email asking for volunteers for an event and think '*that sounds like fun*'. But then I'd realize that my ChIMPs were already so full, I could barely read everything that was already there. Oh well. *Delete*.

I once overheard a woman talk about her previous job at The Container Store, where she *loved* organizing and labeling and filling containers because it satisfied her OCD. I ran to my office and pulled down a sticky note from outside the frame and shoved it in her hands without looking.

She laughed and asked, "Are you slipping me your number?!?"

*"Something better." I replied.*

She opened it up and read the words "Shop for and organize food for at-risk kids."

Tears filled her eyes.

"Thank you...", she said. "I need something like this."

I did, too. After we hugged, I gave her my credit card and she practically skipped out the door. Now that I think about it, maybe she was excited because it was *my* credit card, and not *hers*.  
Hmmm...

Nevertheless, I began to realize that I was at least pruning in the right direction. Not only was my life changing, but the lives of others were changing as well. I was helping other people get involved in something meaningful to them, but I was also freeing up space in my own life for new creative sprouts to begin to bloom.

Now that the pruning had begun, it was time to learn how to let things simmer.

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## Let It Simmer

Back in the mid-90s, my wife and I took a road trip through the south. At an overnight stop in New Orleans, I noticed that the legendary bluesmaster B. B. King was scheduled to perform while we were there. What a surprise! I was *stoked!* That night, I walked down to a dive bar in the French Quarter to see this bucket-list blues icon in action. The place was packed. We were crammed wall-to-wall, shoulder-to-shoulder, into this smoky, sweaty, dimly lit pub. As the band took the stage, King picked up *Lucille*, his famous ebony Gibson 335 hollowbody, and began to play. The band followed. Always the master, King improv'd his way in and out of 'Let the Good Times Roll', 'Hummingbird', and 'The Thrill is Gone', taking his time and giving each note every ounce of emotion and passion it deserved.

*It was glorious.*

But then something changed. The band eased into one of my favorite tunes called 'How Blue Can You Get?'. The drums gently loped along with the bass line. The piano player tickled the keys, teasing the song to life. The whole band was grooving in this slow, muddy delta jam of emotion and experience. Every set of hips and shoulders were swaying to the beat, slowly rocking back and forth in expectation.

King began to sing, "I been downhearted, baaaaby". The crowd responded with that groaning, familiar 'uh' sound you hear in full-gospel churches in the south. People began to shout 'come on!' and 'tell it!' This was a spiritual moment.

"Eeeeeeever since the day we met...", he continued.

The crowd began to respond as if King was an old-time preacher at a tent revival. An older African-American man in a gray fedora leaned over next to me and put his hand on my shoulder. He looked me square in the eye and said, '*I know that's right...*'

We both grinned.

King continued through the verse:

*"I said, I've been downhearted, baby*

*Ever since the day we met.*

*Our love is nothing but the blues, woman*

*Baby, how blue can you get?"*

Right then, just before the chorus, he stopped. Cold. Like a '74 Cadillac hitting a brick wall. I mean, he just *quit*. But he motioned for the band to keep playing. He was choked with emotion.

King leaned into the microphone and, in this melodic sort of whisper-prayer, said, "Whew! Lawd Almighty.... Imma just leave that right there."

The band eased into their groove, leaving their leader alone. I stood there, with 250 of my new closest friends, in this negative space where words should have been but weren't. Where guitar licks should be playing but are conspicuously absent. I was just... waiting. Waiting in the space. Waiting in the emptiness. Standing. Expecting. Just *being*. After several bars of letting the moment marinate, B.B said something more profound than I ever expected. He said, "We gonna just let that *simmer* a minute..."

A few bars later, BB hit one lone, wailing, *bendy* note on Lucille. It sent electric chills through the audience. The band began to ramp up. The bass thumped and kicked us forward. The snare popped. *And the hair on the back of my neck stood up.* (As I'm writing this, remembering the moment, again it stands up.) King began to improvise over the song, wailing and singing and bending strings. Sweating and pouring out his soul through his fingers and his voice. Complete in-the-moment creativity. And please understand when I say this: *It was life-changing.*

That last sentence is not hyperbole. It's not exaggeration. I'm not saying it to get your attention or to make a point. I'm telling you, that moment changed my life. It changed me. It taught me the power of *letting it simmer.*

Please hear me on this: Pruning gives your creativity time and space to *simmer*. Without the space to simmer, without the mental

elbow room to let things marinate, your creativity will continue to be confined and boxed in to that 'leftover space' you have in your life. You'll continue to bounce around in that semi-productive, semi-creative space that's never satisfied. It's like an airplane always circling the runway, but never really able to land. Sooner or later, the pilot will have to grab his parachute and jump, leaving the plane to crash. And that's not what we're after.

As you begin to prune things out of your life like needless busyness, excessive obligations, etc., you'll begin to recognize the importance of that negative space in developing creative ideas. I can tell you that the time in between my active moments is when ideas begin to germinate. It's the time when I gain insights into problems or creative blocks. The negative space is when I begin to forge mental connections to things I hadn't noticed before. When my life is a constant blur of activity, focus, and obligation, I miss out on creative breakthroughs and connections. Put simply: *The things that are not there will have a greater impact on my life much more than those that are there.*

So here's the million dollar question: *What can you prune?* What 'negative space' can you open up by letting go of obligations? Maybe you can train someone at work. Delegate some small-but-time-consuming task. You can put to use some productivity services like Unroll Me so you can stop playing Whack-A-Mole with your email and wasting countless hours a week fighting your inbox. Quit binge-watching the newest, hottest Netflix series in favor of pursuing things that make you feel alive. Stop mindlessly trolling social media during lunch or evening hours, and do your creative 'thing'. What can you prune?

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## Prayer and Meditation

I try always to start my day with some kind of prayer or meditation time. While I realize those words, *prayer* and *meditation*, can be culturally loaded words and may bring up negative reactions, hear me out: I'm convinced that the Universe we live in is full of creative, unique, abundant, thriving, and healing properties. You may or may not believe in God or Spirit or any particular religious dogma. I personally believe the whole "in the beginning, God created..." thing. So I spend a few minutes each morning praying and meditating on Scripture, on gratitude, on things I'm thankful for or wisdom I'm seeking in a certain part of my life.

That may not be you, and that's fine. For now, at least be open to the possibility that by beginning your day in *searching* or *asking* for help in your creative life (as well as other areas of life), it might actually lead to help. Ask and you might really receive. Seek and you might actually find. Knock and the door may actually open. What have you got to lose?

I usually pick three different things each morning to be grateful for. My wife. My sons. My daughter. My job. A new guitar lick. Hot coffee. Air conditioning. Hope. Tacos. Motorcycles. Ibuprofen. Cinnamon. Levi's jeans. Boots. The ability to walk. The ability to read and write. The blessing of living in the United States. The sun on my face. The smell of freshly cut grass. Snare drums. Wifi. Electricity. Ice cream. *Whatever*. For five minutes I focus on those things.. *Really* focus. And I try hard to actually *feel* the gratitude for those things.

For the next five minutes I may meditate on a truth I'm trying to

learn or that I'm trying to *incarnate* into my life. For example:

"Freely you receive, so freely give."

"Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you."

"Love your enemy."

"Love never fails."

"Beauty comes out of ashes."

Or whatever it is that I need to be reminded of that day. It not only calms me and helps me stay grounded and focused, but it reminds me of who I am and who I'm created to be. It also prepares me for my Morning Pages.

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Taming The Monkey Mind

*"Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I'll spend the first four sharpening the axe."*

—Abraham Lincoln

*"Whacking trees with a blunt axe is no way to go through life."*

—Tim Ferriss

The first time I heard Tim Ferriss use the term 'Monkey Mind', I sat up straight. I tuned in midway through a podcast of the Tim Ferriss Show and had absolutely no idea who the guest was, what the topic of conversation was, or anything else. But when he said the words 'Monkey Mind', I knew *exactly* what he was talking about. Because I had one.

You've seen people with a Monkey Mind before. You can pick them out. Their life is filled with sticky notes and scribbled reminders. Their office and car are full of clutter. Conversations and meetings are a swirl of unfocused chatter. Always harried, hurried, and sprinting off in a cloud of dust. To the untrained eye, they may seem like the hardest working person in the room. To others, they are disorganized and undisciplined: always late to meetings, always looking for notes, always hoarding piles of stuff *just in case* one day they'd actually need a book-on-tape series from 1983, or the top half of a broken Dell printer, or a printout of an email thread about toilet paper.

*Sigh. I'm not even kidding.*

It's the person with an out-of-control Monkey Mind. He isn't in charge. With all the busyness and activity, it's obvious that the Monkey is in charge. And the Monkey is never *fully* productive. Only busy. It is the Monkey Mind that is pulling him from task to task, from sticky note to sticky note, without regard to efficiency or completion. The restless Monkey keeping him busy with chatter and noise... always working fast and furious, but not necessarily working smart or well. Always in a cloud of dust. Never settling down. You're always working against the Monkey when he's

driving the bus. And when the Monkey is driving the bus, you always end up at the Zoo.

Engineering a creative lifestyle means silencing the Monkey Mind. Creativity needs space and time to flourish. It needs room to dance and breathe and play. And with the Monkey Mind driving us around the same cul-de-sac over and over, we're not getting anywhere.

Confession: I have ADD. I know, I know, a lot of people *say* they have ADD these days. It's kind of a *thing*. But I'm pretty sure I'm legitimately saddled with it. It's been a blessing in my life. It's helped me with being a multi-tasker and performer. I've learned how to juggle chord progressions, lyrics, and improvisations, while reading a crowd, cueing the band, keeping in mind what song to do next, all while wondering if I locked my car or left my coffee in the sound booth.

But it's also been a curse. With the advent of social media and constant connectivity, I tend to start a million new things and never finish them. I open a hundred tabs on my web browser of sites I want to read or watch and never get around to looking at them. I start responding to email and get sidetracked by Facebook, Twitter, phone calls, spreadsheets, calendar deadlines, booking venues and running out of coffee. Three hours later I realize I never finished clearing my inbox. Ugh. Welcome to my life.

Several years ago, my doctor gave me an online test to take, with specific instructions how to take the test and email him the results. I almost *sprinted* out the door to my office so I could take it.

After a couple of days, my doctor called.

"Tom," he said, "this is Dr. Musfy. I'm still waiting on your test results."

"I'm sorry, Doc. I started the test as soon as I got back. I really wanted to get through it, but... I got busy, and I kept trying to finish it, and, well... I... I'll get to it this morning... but I *really* did work on it... I even started over six different times..." I trailed off.

"*Six times??*", he responded. "Are you serious?"

"Yessir."

"Well then. Don't worry about it. I think we have our answer.", he chuckled.

So, while I've struggled with ADD, my Monkey Mind made it a gazillion times worse. I knew there had to be a way to take control of my brain and my creative energy. Recognizing the Zeigarnik Effect has helped me make some huge changes along the way.

In 1927, Russian scientist Bluma Zeigarnik discovered what's known as the Zeigarnik effect. She demonstrated that people have a better memory for incomplete, rather than complete, tasks. Once

a task is finished, our brains stop thinking about it. However, when it's interrupted or left incomplete, it stays in our mind and our brain continues to think about it in the background, making it easier to recall..

The downside of the Zeigarnik effect is that the human brain has limited bandwidth. We can easily fill our brains with half-finished ideas and partially-developed concepts that there is literally no room to give birth to any fully developed idea. It's nearly impossible to finish any one thing because our brains are literally filled with *half-thoughts*. Like all those apps running in the background on your phone, incomplete tasks have the tendency to chew up the 'free memory' in your (and my) brain. Welcome to the jungle of the Monkey Mind.

Never underestimate how strangling the cumulative effects of distraction are. These days I've learned to keep my Monkey Mind on a leash. A very *short* leash. And I've done it, not only with the help of prayer and meditation, but with Morning Pages, and the trick of not believing everything I think.

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## Morning Pages

One night at a local song writers group, my friend Rick Busby mentioned a ritual called 'Morning Pages, and it seemed like everyone else in the room nodded with an affirmative grunt except me. I felt like an outsider. So I raised my hand and asked, "Um... Sorry. *Morning Pages?*..."

"When you leave here, stop by the bookstore and pick up Julia

Cameron's 'The Artist's Way', he said, "and read the chapter on Morning Pages, and if you don't do anything else in the whole book...do *that*."

So, I did.

The gist of it is this: get up every morning and write three pages. Don't focus on what you write. Don't focus on grammar, syntax, spelling, coherency, theme, authenticity.... just write. It's not for anyone else to ever see or read. Write whatever comes out. Write whatever is dripping through your brain. Write as though no one else will ever read it. Because no one ever will. And because three pages of stream-of-consciousness writing could change your life like it did mine.

The daily, almost meditative practice of free-form journaling is more valuable to me than any other thing I know. Every morning. Every day. Every holiday. Every workday. When I'm tired. When I'm rested. When I have plenty of time for it. And especially when I don't have plenty of time for it. It seems W. H. Auden may be right: "Routine, in an intelligent man, is a sign of ambition."

Let me be clear: I don't do morning pages to try to come up with ideas or lyrics or clever word-plays. I don't do it to solve problems or discover anything. It's not 'productive' when you think of it in those terms. But it is a powerful tool. As Cameron puts it, morning pages is a sort of 'spiritual windshield wiper' that helps clear the mind and spirit of any noise. And it's the most cost-efficient therapy I've ever run across! Once I can get those "muddy, maddening, confusing thoughts on the page", I can face the day

with clearer eyes.

There are huge benefits to writing every morning. even if no one ever reads it. Remember, it's not the product you should be concerned about. It's the *process*. And it's the process of Morning Pages that tames the Monkey Mind. When I share this with people I always emphasize that it's about the process. I don't give a rip what you write about. Just start writing and don't stop until you've written 3 pages. Just. Write.

*"But what if I can't think of anything to write?"*

That won't happen. Trust me. Just start writing.

*"But what if it does?"*

It won't. Just start writing.

*"But what if it **does**?"*

Then write about this moment. Write about why you think you can't think of anything to write about. Write about how it's stupid to be writing. Write about why you can't write. Write about why you don't feel like writing. Geez... write the same word over and over and over for three pages... I don't care! But I will promise you that once you start writing, you'll think of something. Your brain won't

be a blank whiteboard for longer than a few seconds. The secret is to show up, do the work, and get on with your day.

As you do your Morning Pages, learn to accept the process. Relax in it. Be at peace. Breathe deep. Don't stress. I can't stress this enough—just show up, write three pages, then walk away. Done. Trust the process. No emotion, no drama, and no beating yourself up when it's tough or when you miss a day. Just show up the next morning and do it again. And again. And again. Lather, rinse, and repeat.

My suggestion is to start small. I'm a big fan of rigging the game so you can win, so set a goal to do it just for one week. Set your alarm for 15 minutes earlier than usual, and when you get up, start writing as soon as you can. But only for one week. How easy is that?!? Seven days only. Not for thirty days. Not for a year. Not for the rest of your life. One week. That's your goal. At the end of the week, celebrate!

Then commit to another week.

Then another.

Then another.

After 4 cycles of one-week goals, guess what? You will have completed a month! Time to celebrate again! Even if you skipped a few days. Missing a morning or two isn't failure. It's life. Give

yourself a little grace and carry on. Celebrate the fact that you've probably written more in one month than you may have written in the past year!

## DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU THINK

Have you ever stopped to think about how a thermostat **actually** works? When you dissect it, it's deceptively simple. And amazingly powerful. It doesn't really *do* much. It uses a bimetal strip (typically brass and steel) to act like a thermometer as it reads the air

temperature around it. If the temperature falls above or below certain set points, then it triggers the air conditioning or heating unit to turn on (or off). It's stupid-simple.

Mine is only about 3 inches wide, but it will RULE my 1800 square foot home. If I tell it, it will make my air conditioner units outside work and blow and *sweat* until I get the results I want. If I say, "don't let my house get hotter than 76 degrees," and it's 102 outside, what happens? Those big air conditioners and compressors and fans will swirl and work and sweat until the temperature in my house is 76 or below.

If I tell it "don't let my house get colder than 70" and it's 30 outside, what happens? That tiny thermostat makes my heater fire and boil and blaze until my house is 70 degrees. No matter the outside temperature or the wind chill or the ice on the ground, that tiny little thermostat *rules the air*. Literally.

One secret to unleashing your creativity is realizing your creative mind is *exactly* like that. It is the thermostat of your creative temperature. Whatever limits you place on it will determine how hot or cold you will be. Remember that creativity is a process where *thoughts* become *things*? And if that's true, you and I better be careful to not believe everything we think.

Chew on that for a moment. There's an old saying that goes like this: "Whether you think you can, or you think you can't, you're right." Do you believe it? I do! Have you ever had a moment when you did something you didn't think you were capable of? Ever look back on something and think, "*I can't believe I did that...*".

Maybe it was the first time you asked someone out on a date.

Maybe it was the first time you changed a tire.

Maybe it was when you graduated from college.

Maybe when you got a certain job.

Maybe the first time you sang in public.

Or gave a speech.

Or finished your first 5k race.

Or said, "I do."

Maybe that time in a meeting when you threw out an idea and thought, *"Wait a minute. Did I just say that?? That was pretty good..."*

Whatever it was, in that moment you did something you never thought you could do. Something you'd never done before— but

something you can now easily do *again*. You're not the only one.

Up until 1954, no one had ever run a mile in under four minutes. Ever. For hundreds of years, it was impossible. Coaches, athletes, newspapers, and other 'experts' all said it couldn't be done. In fact, the popular belief was that if someone ran that fast, their heart would explode in their chest and they would drop dead on the track. How's that for motivation to *not* do something?

But on May 6, 1954, Englishman Roger Bannister ran it in 03:59.4. The equivalent of running 15 miles per hour. (Meanwhile, here I sit, thrilled with a 10-minute mile on my Saturday morning jogs!)

After Roger Bannister did the 'impossible', others did it. In fact, his record has broken numerous times and the newest record for the fastest mile is currently set at 03:43.13, a full 17-seconds faster than Bannister!

How? Simple. Because some things just can't be done. *Until someone does them.*

See, until Bannister broke that record, everyone believed it was impossible. Everyone on the planet maintained the same limiting belief that it couldn't be done. And they were right. It couldn't be done. Until someone did it. Until Roger Bannister, that is, did it. He was the first one stop believing what he thought.

Then *John Walker* did it.

Then *Steve Scott* did it.

Then *Noureddine Morceli* did it.

*Along with Jim Ryun, Tim Danielson, Mary Liqouri, Alan Webb, Lukas Verzbicas, Matthew Maton, Grant Fisher, Andrew Hunter, Michael Slagowski, Eamonn Coghlan, Anthony Whiteman, Svetlana Masterkova (the only woman), and Kaniel Komen.*

Not to mention the current record holder, Hicham El Guerrouj, who ran a 3:43 in Rome!

My point is this: once the limits were reset, records were broken. In fact, the entire *game* became different. Why? Because the rules got changed. The old rule of 'a 4-minute mile is impossible' was thrown out. A new rule was put in its place: a 4-minute mile is possible. Athletes stopped believing their old thoughts, and the rules completely changed. Not just for them, for all of us.

What are some things you think about your creativity that you need to stop believing? Can you list them? I hope so. Because on the next page, the rules are changing. We going to change the way we think about creativity. We're going to change the way we think about *you*.

As we start think about moving forward in our creative growth,

there are some very practical things I've experienced that I hope will be helpful here. From here on out, I'll share some interesting *facts* about who you really are. Things I call called *Creative Affirmations*. I'll share with you my *Ten Steps to Creative Living* to help you create a healthier, more balanced lifestyle of creativity and richness, cover some basic techniques to build your *creative muscle* as we stay on the path, and finish up with *40 Ways to Exercise Your Creativity*.

So let's get rolling!

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## Creative Affirmations

This whole idea of "don't believe everything you think" has completely changed me. It's set my creativity free. After my initial head scratching was over, I began to realize the truth: I simply possessed some very limiting beliefs. And since my thoughts, like yours, determine my direction, I needed to make some changes.

See if any of this sounds familiar:

Ever start a new diet and think, "*I'm sure I'll fail at this one, too...*"?

Ever think about applying for a new job but think "*I bet I'm not qualified enough or experienced enough*" and talk yourself out of it before you finish updating your resume?

Ever buy a book or two (or more!) and before you get through the first chapter you begin to think, "*I just know I won't finish these...just like the last ones.*"

Ever make a New Year's resolution on January 1st only to completely abandon it by February 1st?

Me, too. All of the above. And creatively, it's no different.

What if the old proverb, "As a man thinks in his heart, so is he", is true? What if the thing that's holding you back is you? What if we are our own captors?

Chances are the only person that's holding you back is the one on your driver's license. And if you don't have to believe everything *that person* thinks about you and about your creative potential, your entire creative universe will change. Not 'your entire creative universe *can* change'. It *will* change. It really is that simple.

As a result of me making that shift, there are new things I now believe and understand about myself. And from the crazy ways I've seen the Universe work lately, they are real for both you and me whether we believe them or not. Trust me, you don't have to believe something in order for it to be true. It will be true or not regardless of what I we think about it. But if you will make a shift in your thinking, and realize the *truth* about you, your very life can change. I'm not just being melodramatic here. I'm not being

hyperbolic. I believe this in a very literal, tangible, faith-like-a-child kind of way.

What if you believed these creative affirmations about yourself?

1. I am a channel for God's creativity, and my work comes to good.

2. My dreams come from God and God has the power to accomplish them.

3. As I create and listen, I will be led by Creativity itself.

4. Creativity is the Creator's will for me. It is in my DNA. (Remember: In the beginning, God created...)

5. My creativity heals myself (and others) and brings Truth into view.

6. I am allowed to nurture my artist.

7. Through the use of a few simple tools, my creativity will flourish.

8. Through the use of my creativity, I serve God and humanity.

9. My creativity always leads me to truth and love.

10. My creativity leads me to the forgiveness of others and myself.

11. There is a divine plan of goodness for me.

12. There is a divine plan of goodness for my work.

13. As I listen to creativity, I let go of fear.

14. As I listen to my creativity I am led to my Creator.

15. I am willing to create (*i.e. play*).

16. I am willing to learn to let myself create.

17. I am willing to let God create through me.

18. I am willing to be of service through my creativity.

19. I am willing to experience my creative energy.

20. I am willing to use my creative talents.

I know, I know. For some of you, this may sound a little out there. In fact, it may sound *waaaayyyy out there*. You know, like *Pluto*. You may be thinking, "Man, Tom has really gone off the reservation this time." But hang with me through this. And don't give up. Please. Trust that voice in your head that perhaps right now is whispering "*But what if there's something to this...? What if those statements are true? What if I'm the one holding me back?*"

Ask yourself how far along you are in your creative journey? What if something in this list could help you take the next step? What if you could grow your creative muscle to get to the next stage of your journey? What if just *one or two* of those beliefs above could set your creativity free? Wouldn't it be worth a shot?

Let me be clear. There is no one-size-fits-all magic formula for creativity. But I *have* experienced some pretty magical moments. These pages are full of things I've discovered from some pretty amazing people along the way. My sincerest hope is that something here will spark and open the way for you to achieve your greatest creative dreams.

So, repeat after me:

The Great Creator has gifted me with creativity. My gift back to the Great Creator, and to the Universe, is my use of it. I will trust the gift I've been given. I will nurture, cherish, and protect my creative gift. I will not let my gift be squandered by friends, co-workers, day

jobs, family members, Netflix, Xbox, ESPN, guilt, shame, insecurity, fear or laziness.

You might want to re-read that last paragraph. Out loud. You know, just to be sure you heard yourself correctly. You may want to write it down. Stick it on your fridge. Tape it to your bathroom mirror and your dashboard.

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## Ten Steps to Creative Living

If you've made it this far, I need to let you in on another secret.

*Unused creativity is not benign.*

You'd better give it something healthy and positive to do. Otherwise you'll come home one day and realize, like a border collie, it's torn up the couch. Or your relationship with your spouse. Or your career. Or your finances. The Creative Spirit inside you is like an enormous steam engine, churning and thundering in your bones. If you don't give it something to do, it will *find* something to do, usually in the form of depression, frustration, anxiety, cynicism or worry. Or worse.

Our job is to learn to live creatively. Now that we have a shiny new set of rules, and are learning to *play* again, I need to share with you my game plan. I can recognize the truth of *who I am as a*

*creative being. I can silence my fear. I can find my tribe. I can even create escape velocity. But without a plan, I'd feel like a convict who's been told he's free to leave the prison but didn't have a way home. What follows here are my TOP TEN steps that bring me home.*

In order to live creatively, I must:

**1. Show up regularly.** Whether it's on a page, a canvas, a notebook, a laptop screen, or a workshop, the first rule of success is to show up. Just *be there*. Don't procrastinate, and don't make excuses.

When I was in college, I may have I skipped a class or three. Some professors could care less, but some took it personally. Dr. J.D. Brooks was one particular white-haired professor that became my favorite. I hated to miss his class—it was always entertaining—but in the spring time, my girlfriend and the nearby lake were much more appealing to me than his lectures. Not even *close*. So I'd bail on his class and hardly look back. Without fail, Dr. Brooks always greeted me the next day with, "Tom, you're never gonna pass this class by remote control."

He was right. Showing up is half of any battle. But especially the creative one. Show up regularly, whatever that may be for you: every morning, every evening, every Saturday, or every hour. Use the 'page' to rest. To dream. To play. To try. And that thing called Morning Pages was a huge help in my 'showing up'.

**2. Fill the well by caring for my artist.** Angelo Bundini, trainer and Svengali to the late great Mohammed Ali, was as mystical as he was intense. Many times, during training and during actual fights, Ali would tire out. Completely out of gas—or so he thought. Although mentally worn and weary, Bundini would shout, "Go to the well, Champ! Go to the well!"

Bundini was urging The Champ to dig deep. Reminding him that there was more inside him if he would just dig a little more. Push a little harder. Look a little closer. Miraculously, Ali would rise to the challenge. He'd hit harder. Stronger. He'd dance lighter on his feet. Ducking. Rising. Dodging. He'd faithfully 'go to the well' and find his reward.

The key? Make sure you have something in the well to draw from. If the well is dry, you're in trouble before you ever begin. You're toast. If you're running on too little sleep, poor eating habits, unrelenting stress, crushing financial weight, and unfulfilling personal relationships, your well is nothing more than an empty bucket. You've got nothing to go to. Caring for yourself and cultivating a healthy lifestyle—emotionally, physically, spiritually, and intellectually—will help you fill the well. Keep it full!

**3. Set small and gentle goals and meet them.** I know this sounds like a contradiction. It's enticing to think, "If I set a big goal, then even if I fail, I will have gained more ground than I can imagine." Looking back, I've said and written those kinds of things. And, yes, they've got some advantages. Like earlier when I wanted to write a new song every week... *that* was a lofty goal. And it worked in the short term. While it *did* jumpstart my creativity, it just wasn't sustainable at the time. If *all* I had to do in my life was write, I might could pull it off, easy-peasy. But I have a life. A job. A

family. So that kind of goal wasn't realistic for me over the long haul.

By setting small and gentle goals, I'm setting myself up for success, not failure. I'm rigging the system to *win*, not to struggle. And by default, I'm more encouraged and satisfied, and more likely to *stay on the path*. Staying on the path for the long haul is *much* better than feeling burned out, frustrated and defeated.

**4. Pray for guidance, courage, and humility.** Every day. I ask for guidance in what I'm doing, to be open to the moving of the creative spirit, to not resist playing with new ideas or going into unfamiliar territory.

I ask for courage to stand against my fears. Feelings of inadequacy or jealousy, comparing myself to others, and general laziness or procrastination are all fruits of fear. They may disguise themselves differently, but it's fear all the same. And yes, sometimes fear may even disguise itself as *busyness*. I need and want all the courage I can get.

I also ask for the gift of humility. As creatives, we serve the Universe. We have the privilege of making *thoughts* into *things*. We create in order to bring hope and truth. To point out injustice. To communicate an experience or a need. To help humanity celebrate or mourn or evolve. Even simply putting a smile on someone's face with of a happy, bubble-gummy pop song, a silly drawing, or a well-crafted email is a privilege when they've had a horrible day. Humility is key to our creativity. There's no room for ego. We're not made for red carpets. We're made for brooms.

We're the janitors of the Universe who sweep up and make things right again.

**5. Remember that it is far harder and much more painful to be a blocked artist than it is to do the work.** Doing creative work with a playful, trickster spirit is easy and fun. In the section ahead titled *40 Ways To Exercise Your Creative Muscle*, you'll discover some ways to stop feeling 'blocked' so that you can start creating. You'll see you how a simple change in taking an adventurous mindset can lead to an easier way to feel creative. It's freeing. It's liberating.

**6. Be alert, always on the lookout for the presence of the Great Creator leading my inner artist.** In my early songwriter days, I was asking everyone I knew for advice. I would not only ask musicians and writers, but people in the industry, online gurus, Facebook groups, Twitter coaches... I even asked the guy who does our lawn, Gregorio, "What's the best advice you have for writing a song?" He doesn't speak English, and I apologized in advance for my Spanish: *"Espanol no es muy facil para me, pero practico mucho...you know?"*

I think he replied with something along the lines of "Don't ask me. I'm the gardener."

I continued looking everywhere for advice until one day when a long-time friend named Waylon contacted me. As we started catching up, I realized it had been 5 or 6 years since we talked. As it turns out, Waylon had not only starred in several movies, but written several hit songs and had even landed a Grammy™ or

two. So I asked, "OK, hotshot. What's the best advice you can give me for songwriting?"

He grinned. "Pay attention", he said. "Be alert. Listen. Pray. Always have your antenna up. Most people go through life on autopilot, not really listening, not really watching, not really awake. You can't afford that."

He was right. Pay attention. Stay awake to the world around you. Ask God and the Universe for help... and get ready to be nudged. Be listening. Be watching. Ask and you will receive. If you'll pay attention, you'll be amazed.

### **7. Choose companions who encourage you to do the work.**

It's easy to talk about doing the work, or talk about why we're not doing the work. Stay away from people who just want to commiserate with you. Stay away from creatives who will moan about how you have to have connections or money or education or a fancy studio or the latest technology or a rich sugar daddy in order to succeed. In fact, *run* away from those people. Avoid them like grandma's fruitcake. Not only are they blocked, frustrated creatives who are unhappy with themselves, they are *creative death* to those of us trying to stay on the path. Run like the wind, Forrest.

Instead, find companions that are creative and that are growing. Find companions who are trying. Who are stretching. Even if they are failing. Those are the people you need to encourage you. When you've found them, tell them all about your creative

aspirations and goals, *but no one else*. Outsiders won't understand it. They're perennial wet blankets to people like us. But the ones that encourage you to keep going? Bare your soul to them. They're your people.

**8. Remember that the Great Creator loves creativity.** He can't help it. It's his identity. I mean, it's right there in the name itself: *Creator*. Whatever your particular faith or religious worldview—or your non-religious world view—might be, I challenge you to envision this scenario as you create.

*As you express your creativity, whatever that looks like, imagine God looking over your shoulder or sitting next to you. Imagine God as joyful, peaceful, smiling, laughing...even giggling, as you work. Imagine God as a Good Father who's amazingly proud and excited about every little thing you create. Every picture gets hung on His fridge. Every song and dance is met with applause. Imagine God delighting in every **attempt** in creating something, not because it is good or professional or flawless, but because it came from YOU, His creative child.*

In my mind and imagination, that's *exactly* what happens as I am using my creative gifts in any project. I hope that picture resonates with you. I'll be honest. It's taken a while for me to accept it and believe it. But I hope you'll adopt it just as I have.

**9. Remember that it is your job to *do* the work, not *judge* the work.** I was in a meeting a few years ago when some co-workers were talking about a new statue in the area that they thought was

completely terrible. One of them made the comment, "Well, you know... you can't really *define* art."

"Huh? Sure you can," I said. "Art is defined as the act of putting a frame around a moment."

I'm not sure where that statement came from, but it's taught me one thing: just do the work. Whether you write or draw or sing or paint or build or garden, just freakin' do it. Don't judge it. Yes, in a year or two you'll look back and realize that, if you were to do it again, you'd do it a little differently. A little better perhaps.

So what? You're creating *now*. In *this* moment. Today, you do the work that is in you to do *today*, and you let it stand on its own merits. You put a frame around who you are, where you are, what you are *today*. You don't judge it on the merits of your work in a year. And you don't let the judgment of others cloud up your head. Just do the work. Just let your creative freak flag fly, baby.

**10. Place this sign in your workplace: *Great Creator, I will take care of the quantity. You take care of the quality.***

Seriously, let that be your assignment. Print it out. Write it on the wall. Draw it. Paint it. Let it be a visible, tangible reminder that you can see and touch. And every time you sit down to *play*, read it. Pray it. Ask it. Speak it. Remind yourself and the Universe that you are here and ready to serve. The Great Creator will take care of the rest. I have mine hanging above the computer in my studio. Where will yours go?

## STAY ON THE PATH, GRASSHOPPER

When I finally settled into a creative groove, I set a goal of writing and completing one song every week. Basically, I was just gonna play the odds. I'd heard Eddie Vedder once say, "If you think you might be good at songwriting, give it a shot. Go write a hundred of them and then you'll know." A hundred songs seemed like a mountain I wasn't strong enough to climb yet, but I was sure I could write one song a week. Easy enough. I figured if I rolled the dice enough times, *surely* I'd at least get lucky once or twice. Plus, if I wrote 52 songs, or one each week, after a year I'd at least know if I was on the right track or if I was just embarrassing myself. This was an experiment in creativity I could play with.

In the first six weeks, I wrote 9 songs. I was so proud! The overachiever in me was on fire! I knew that I couldn't keep up that kind of pace—it was taking me *hours* of time and I was sacrificing other responsibilities—but I committed to ride it out. By week 14, I had written 15 songs. I was tiring out, but I was still ahead of schedule. But by week 24, I had written only 18 songs.

Then I hit The Wall. That dreaded *Writer's Block*. Fear began to creep into my heart and mind that this was going to be like every other endeavor I'd ever done: start strong, but never finish. I felt like such an imposter. I thought "*Well, dude. Guess you're not really a writer after all. You're not as creative as you thought, huh? I mean, creative people don't run out of ideas after just three or four months on the job... Oh, well. You had a good run. You might as well stop here. You embarrassed yourself enough as it is. There's no use being an idiot about it. At least you didn't tell too many people what you were doing... THAT would've been embarrassing!*"

Ugh. I was feeling burned out, trying to keep up the pace and the pressure of 'one song per week', on top of the rest of my life. Things like two jobs, three kids, a wife, coordinating a program that feeds poverty-stricken kids, coaching a soccer team, playing gigs with my band and sleeping. A few nights later, a songwriting buddy of mine named Mike texted me with this message:

*"Dude. I know you're busy...but would you like to do some co-writing? I just finished up a co-write with [one writer] and I'm polishing up another one with [another writer] as well. I have a lot of lyrical energy these days...ideas are just flowing out of me right now. I really don't want to waste it."*

He went on to talk about how his lyrics have just been pouring out and, even though they may not all be great, world-changing ideas, they are still, in fact, *pouring out*. His creativity was gushing like a fire hose. He was just turning the nozzle and ideas were flooding out! It sounded magical. Mystical. The problem, he said, was

wading thru the flood and trying to decide what to save and what to throw away. That part of it was pretty overwhelming.

*Well. Poor Mikey. Such a problem to have... TOO MUCH inspiration? TOO MANY ideas? The Muse is inspiring him TOO OFTEN? Well, boo-freakin'-hoo... I only wish for days like that...*

I was depressed. I searched. I fought. I dug through piles of dusty books at used book stores. I sat at the kitchen table in the evenings with colored pencils and coloring books like a kindergartner in art class. I scribbled and drew tattoo designs. I watched painfully boring documentaries on 'creativity' on YouTube and Netflix. It was terrible.

I was dry.

Thirsty.

Tired.

Fearful.

Anxious.

Weary.

And then the truth hit me like a truck.

*Unleashing your creativity is not about keeping up the pace. It's about keeping on the path.*

It was more valuable than gold: One of the greatest secrets of creativity is NOT in managing my time, but managing my energy.

Something amazing happened when I started going into my office early in the mornings. In the beginning, it was glorious. At 7 a.m. things were quiet. Productive. My mind was calm. The coffee gurgled and the air conditioner unit hummed outside my window quietly as my creative child played with ideas. For a few weeks, my creativity *skyrocketed*. And then, it started to slowly wane. So I went in a little earlier. And earlier. But it was gone. The mojo had officially left the building. It vanished like a snowman in Houston. What happened?

I had assumed the act of getting an early start was what was boosting my creativity. And that my have helped it along, but that wasn't actually what was boosting it. The reality was that it was more the act of *changing my routine* than anything else. The fresh environment. The newness. But at some point, the new routine became the old routine, and I was back to square one. So now what was I to do?

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## BUILDING YOUR CREATIVE MUSCLE

*You are a uniquely created person. You have unique gifts and talents given to you by the Creator. Only you can do what only you can do. Therefore, creating a 'healthy state of being' for you may likely look a little bit different for you than it does for me. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to starting strong. And there are truckloads of books on the stuff. Some are written by well-meaning coaches and gurus who genuinely want to help. And some are written by snake oil charlatans who are eager to take your money and sell you a formula that may or may not make a drip of difference for you. Do your research and find what works for you. If you're reading this, take it as a sign. Get healthy. Get balanced. We need you. The world needs your talents. Society needs to hear what you have to say. Your community needs to read what you have to write. We need you as much as you need us. So find what works for you. The list below is what currently works for me. Your mileage may vary.*

But before you begin, **make sure you're doing the basics right.** If your body, mind and soul are running on fumes, it's like running your car with the Check Engine light on and you're about to be in serious trouble. Make sure you're getting enough sleep. Drink plenty of water. Spend time every morning in prayer and/or meditation. Spend time every morning in gratitude and thankfulness. Put healthy fuel in your body and make sure to exercise it. Don't forget your Morning Pages.

*I know I sound like your mother. She was right.*

Also, you know how they say one man's trash is another man's treasure? Well, I say, "*one man's groove is another man's rut.*"

Now, I don't know if you've ever *been* in a creative rut before... Well, actually, I do know. Because I know if you've done anything creative for more than a minute, then you know what I mean. When I'm in a creative funk, nothing feels right. Everything is just *blah*. I feel like I'm beating my head against a wall, and the Muse is *mocking* me. Like Elizabeth Gilbert, I begin to wonder, "what if my best work is *behind* me?". Fear creeps in. I feel like I'm trapped in a dark pit of *nothingness*. And I hope to God I can climb out.

Maybe for you it's not quite that strong. Or maybe it is. But we've all been there. There are days when our creativity flows freely, when the Muse dances along with us, and inspiration is offered up to us like a birthday present from the Universe. Those days are freakin' awesome. I mean, you're well rested, you're thinking clearly, ideas are available and just hanging around like grapes on a vine, ready to be picked. Who *doesn't* love those days?

But then there are days when you've got *nothin'*. Every idea you have is stale and tasteless. Boring. Unmotivated. Those are the days the well runs dry. Every song lyric falls flat. Every chord progression is lifeless. Nothing feels new. Nothing excites our curiosity or our playfulness. Everything just seems *gray*.

In those days, what do you do? How do you grow your creativity?

How do you feed and water and nurture it? In my experience, I've found three basic categories that have helped me.

4. **Get outside voices.** Innovation and creativity are literally *everywhere*. Steve Jobs once said '*creativity is just connecting things*'. When I need a fresh shot of creativity, I immediately look for outside voices to inject into my soul. I recently asked my Facebook tribe for suggestions on audio books. Fiction. Non-fiction. History. Psychology. Drama. Poetry. The response was amazing! Not only did I receive about 30 widely-varied suggestions while I slept that night, it also gave me a priceless insight into the people in my tribe. I grabbed 2 random suggestions (someone in my community actually 'gifted' me a book on Audible.) and got started. I do whatever I can do to make my right brain chart new territory. For me, it's not necessarily about the source of the voice. It's more about exposing myself to a new voice. That's helped me gather enough 'escape velocity' to blast out of the rut I'm in.
  
5. **Get out of your head.** Yes, creativity can be difficult sometimes. It can take effort. But remember, all creativity is *play*, not *work*. You don't work a violin, remember? The moment my creative endeavor becomes 'work', I'm done. Finished. Kaput. You see, work comes from our head, but play is in our heart and soul. The moment I can get out of my head and return to 'play', I'm free. When I'm creatively stuck, I remember that the Universe is brimming with creative possibilities and ideas, and that children have no problem creating things that are disposable. They make songs or pictures and then discard them as if there is an abundant supply of creativity in them. And they're right. So I try to get out of my head and get back to play. Recreation is *re-creation*.

6. **Get into your heart/emotion.** Emotion is the seat of passion. And emotion creates *motion*. When you're stuck, you gotta get moving, right? Pick an emotion and go to that place where you feel it can intensely (a memory, a hope, a fear, a dream ) and create something from within that state of mind/feeling. Typically, I think anger and love are the two emotions we can tap into quickest. (Remember, the goal is to get moving quickly.) Ask yourself, "What makes me angry?" Is it injustice? Is it wounds you've suffered? Is it something personal? Political? Cultural? Whatever it is, hop online and read up on the latest statistics or events about it. Get all 'activist' angry about it. Really angry. I mean, like, Hulk-Angry. Now go write. Vent. Vomit. Purge. Sit down at your notepad or keyboard and *just freakin' bleed*. The same thing can be said for the emotion of love. Going through pictures, videos, memories or even the belongings of a loved one can stir up powerful, passionate emotions. It can be even more powerful if that loved one is no longer living. (My mom passed away just before Mother's Day last year, so this has been especially helpful for me lately.)

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## 40 WAYS TO EXERCISE YOUR CREATIVITY

When I was making notes for this book, I *really* wanted to call this section *365 Ways To Exercise Your Creativity*. Because, you know, that would rock. It could be one thing every day for a whole year. People would be so impressed (or so I'd imagined). But I think it's better to have a *few* ways that have definitely helped me, rather than list a gazillion ways that might be helpful to you. These are just a few to prime your creative pump. There are endless variations and tweaks I've made over the years. Think of this list as a springboard— as you begin, you'll discover your own

variations and modifications to try. This approach actually does two amazing things.

First, as you experiment, you'll be exercising your creative muscle much more than if you were following a recipe in this or any other book. And second, when you discover something that works for you, *share it* with the tribe. Share it on social media, send it to your tribe, or email me at [tom@tomcottar.org](mailto:tom@tomcottar.org). We're all on this path together!

Without further ado, here are forty exercises that have been helpful to me in my creative journey.

**1. Go on an Artist Date.** In *The Artist's Way*, Julia Cameron suggests taking weekly artist dates. Take yourself to an art gallery. Go to a museum. Explore a neighboring town. Visit a tourist destination close by. Check out a vintage clothing store or costume shop. A bookstore or library. An indie or foreign film. A resale shop or swap meet. A car show. The possibilities are endless. The goal is to go by yourself, to explore and discover something new. Be aware. Don't rush. Drink it all in. Every. Last. Drop. You're on a date to recharge and refill. You need to receive whatever it is that you find. And receive whatever it is that *finds you*.

With the life I lead (much like the life *you* lead), sometimes it's tough to take a weekly artist date. However, certain times of year may be easier than others, because certain seasons of life are naturally less hectic and stressful. But whatever the case may be, it's helped me to schedule my artist dates on my calendar as an

'appointment', and treat it as important as any other appointment on my calendar!

For the creative spirit, an artist date is just as important as any medical appointment or workplace meeting. It will nourish your mind and soul, resulting in greater productivity and energy, not just in your creative life, but also in your work and family life.

2. **Take a rest.** In our culture, *workaholism* is perceived as a badge of honor. It's the supposed gold medal of a hard work ethic. It's the characteristic that's built legends, CEOs, superstar athletes, and mega-celebrities. And it's a *lie*.

Years ago I worked for a religious organization. During one particular executive board meeting, we were interviewing candidates for a top tier position. The director enthusiastically described his favorite candidate (my soon-to-be new boss!) as '*a workaholic*' and '*someone who will make you proud*'. I was dumbfounded. Why on Earth would an organization claiming to be founded on religious values like 'sabbath rest' glorify something like workaholism? How is workaholism *not* diametrically opposed to the values expressed in a traditional religious community?

Why do we give so much lip service to rest and yet so many of us are chronically fatigued? Maybe we secretly believe that rest is for the weak. That those who are strong will hustle and succeed. Is that what you believe? Do you believe that rest is only for the weak? Do you think that success is made by constantly pushing and hustling and grinding?

*Please listen carefully. This may be the most valuable thing you hear today. It is not weakness to rest. It is wisdom. A regular rhythm without rest will lead to exhaustion.* It leads to being burned out, burned up, and withered. Trust me. I'm speaking from experience here. Your creativity and productivity will suffer if you are running on fumes. Sure, you can push through and grind it out and get leftovers. Your health, your spirit, and your loved ones will suffer. And your creativity will be garbage. *I know this full well.*

In 'The Accidental Creative', Henry Todd says, "Although the brain is only about 2% of our body weight, it consumes about 20 percent of available oxygen and glucose. This means that when we are tired, our mind is less capable of functioning at its maximum potential. We are less likely in these times to forge connections and experience conceptual and creative breakthroughs simply because our brain doesn't have the basic energy required to perform the complex tasks needed to generate ideas."

If that is the case, exactly *how* is it that we think we can function at an optimal creative level without proper rest? For that reason, there's a mantra posted next to my office door at eye level so everyone who enters can see it. It reads, "Being busy is not the same as being productive." I know way too many people who seem to feel that burning the candle at both ends is an acceptable way to produce quality creative work.

They could not be more wrong. They could *try*, but they could not.

Even good ol' Honest Abe Lincoln once said, "If you give me 6

hours to cut down a tree, I will spend the first hour sharpening the axe." Rest is what sharpens your mental and creative axe.

As I am writing this section, I'm secluded in a cabin on Lake Travis, just outside of Austin, Texas. For weeks, I've been running thin. Less sleep, more coffee. Less patience, more irritability. When I begin to feel like I am being stretched too thin, I know it. But when I get stretched *beyond* thin, everybody around me knows it. Luckily, I finally had a opening in my schedule and my wife scheduled me an appointment.

Not really an appointment, per se. More like a prescription. "Tom," she said, "you're going to load up the motorcycle, ride out to the lake and stay the night in Danny's cabin. You're gonna unplug. Relax. Write. Hike. Play. Take time to sharpen the axe. And don't come back for at least a couple of days." She rocks like that.

Hours of solitude and quiet to recharge my introvert batteries. Immersed in the winding hills and swerving county roads on the bike (we call it *wind* therapy). The hum of the tires and the radio blaring. Long walks among the cedars and rugged hill country of central Texas. My backpack filled with books and my growler filled with fresh Costa Rican coffee. No cell phone service. No email. No wifi. No meetings. Just sunshine and time. Just room to be still and breathe.

*That's my kind of rest.* Remember, creativity thrives on regular rituals of rest. No sane person can work 24/7 and survive... much less create.

**3. Go for a walk.** Or a run. Exercise is known for enhancing the brain. Some of my greatest problem-solving breakthroughs took place while I was out on a walk or run. I bet it's the same for you, too. For me, I love to run. The pounding of my feet on the pavement while my heartbeat pounds in my ears is like music to my soul. The long, steady breathing in my lungs while my mind drifts off to the rhythm of my stride. I love it. I'll never be a competitive runner, but it's kept me sane and more creative.

Not a runner? That's fine. Go for a swim. Or a bike ride. Get a jump rope or a punching bag or a yoga mat. Just be sure to get moving!

**4. Take a bath.** Hot. Long. Relaxing. Let your conscious mind wander and rest, while your subconscious mind works and plays with the blockage at hand. Light some candles. Play some relaxing music from a random streaming playlist. Throw in a handful of bath salts or bubbles and unplug.

**5. Watch cartoons.** Seriously. I love all the old Warner Bros. cartoons. Especially stuff like Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote! And anything by Walt Disney. My go-to's are old school animated ones, not the newer CGI stuff. Things like Fantasia, Dumbo, Cinderella and Bambi. For me, the more cinematic and musical the content, and the less dialogue, the better. For you, it might be other shows from your childhood. I have a friend who watches Full House and Animaniacs. The point is to nurture your Inner Child, remember? Not the Editor. Not the Critic. But the Child who plays and sings and draws and dances. He or she is the artist we want to create with.

**6. Buy a coloring book.** Adult coloring books are en vogue right now. At the time of this writing, they are all the rage. There are adult coloring books designed for mental stimulation. For meditation. For relaxation. I'm sure they are all well and good. In fact, I have several different ones. My favorite one right now is a coloring book of tattoo designs that my daughter and I color in together. My personal feeling is that any coloring book will do. Princesses or pirates. Disney characters or famous landmarks. I'm not sure it really matters. For me, the objective is to create something. To experiment. To try different things. Try coloring outside the lines. Try using 'opposite' colors (if the picture is a goldfish in water, make the water orange and the fish blue..). Throw on some music that fits your mood, light a candle or some incense, and experiment. Have fun. So what if you feel silly? Who cares? Give it a shot!

**7. Watch documentaries.** Sometimes a documentary about a highly successful and creative person will be inspirational. Try TED talks. Try some independent documentaries from Netflix, Hulu, or YouTube Red. Watch with the intention of learning something new. You'd be surprised how many random ideas lead to other random ideas that lead to the idea you've been looking for. Be *teachable*. Remember: be the *amateur*.

**8. Watch Spanish TV.** I'd guess any foreign language programming will do but Telemundo and Univision are my networks of choice. From *telenovellas* (like American soap operas) to *deportes* (sports), watching something in a foreign language can be invigorating to your creative juices. I love to watch the interaction of characters, facial expressions, body languages, etc. of the actors. It's a great way to break out of the confines of language and just take it in, just like watching an Italian opera. You can argue the difference in artistic merit between an Italian opera

and *12 Corazones*... but the creative mileage from each one can be extraordinary.

**9. Get a dog.** Not a cat, but a dog. While cats may be good pets as they are independent and don't require much fuss, cats don't provide the same companionship and camaraderie of man's best friend. I don't know anyone who loads up their truck with a couple of buddies, some fishing poles, an ice chest and *their cat* for the weekend. Caring for (i.e., petting, walking, and interacting with) a dog has been scientifically proven to lower your stress levels (including cortisol hormones), lower your blood pressure and heart rate, as well as increase your body's endorphin production. There is a reason why dogs, like rabbits, are used regularly as therapy animals. They are invigorating, relaxing, and therapeutic. But be warned: your dog is very empathic. She will feel what you feel. She will become your mirror. If you have anxiety, your dog will have anxiety. If she is undisciplined, it is likely because you are undisciplined. While dogs are wonderful for your physical well-being—stress, blood pressure, mental health—they can also be great, yet sometimes painful, for self growth.

More importantly, have you ever left the house for a few hours? You know, like while you run to the grocery store? Or go for a walk? Or maybe just because you have a *life*?

If you're lucky, when you come home the cat might look up at you while lying on the couch. Maybe. But good ol' Fido is there at your feet, wagging his butt like he's about to *explode*. It doesn't matter if you were gone for 3 minutes or 3 months. He's thrilled to see you. Ecstatic. Overjoyed. And that's *got* to make you feel loved and special and wanted.

All of that helps foster a more relaxed, more creative state of mind for you and I. We're terrible creators when we're stressed, ragged and burned out. Even a 10-minute romp with my dog, Harley, can lower my stress and elevate my creativity.

**10. Take a different route home.** Leaving my office one day, I was more stressed and anxious than usual. I had been working on a project and felt like I'd hit a creative wall. Frustrated, I decided to take 'the long way' home around a local lake and recreation area to help me unwind. As I drove, I noticed the road was in terrible shape. There were more potholes than pavement. And there were cows. Lots of cows. I noticed sailboats on the water. I watched a girl on a kite-surfing rig do some *amazing* acrobatics 40 feet in the air. I put the windows down and felt the breeze. The sound of the water lapping the shore crept into my vehicle. The traffic was terrible, but I didn't care. I was noticing all kinds of new things only minutes from my neighborhood. My view of the world around me was changing.

While it only added 8 minutes to my commute home, I noticed that I felt more creative that evening. That next morning, I took that same route back to work, trying to test my new hypothesis. For the next couple of days, I simply drove this route, taking in all the new sights and sounds I'd discovered. This seemingly insignificant change in my daily behavior seemed to make a difference in my creative blockage. Breaking up the routine seemed to exercise new synapses in my brain, thus spurring a new sense of creativity.

Create a new routine in your life. Somewhere. Anywhere. I'm convinced it's not so much *what* the new thing is that you're doing,

but more simply, *that* you're doing a new thing.

**11. Try a boring ritual.** This seems contradictory, but have a mundane, mind-numbing, do-it-in-your-sleep-even-without-coffee ritual. There are certain habits that seem to ready my brain for creating something. I'm a big believer in rituals. Even if I'm working from home, I get up and take a shower, brush my teeth, get dressed, put on shoes and have breakfast just as if I'm going to work in an office. Those who know me closely know that I have several black t-shirts. My favorite 'uniform' of the day is a black t-shirt and jeans for several reasons. It's easy. It's casual. It's consistent. It all looks the same across all my social media platforms, so when I connect with new people I am immediately recognized as 'the guy in the black shirt'. But the main reason I like it is that I can spend *zero* time and energy trying to decide what to wear. Unless, of course, it's a special occasion or event. In those cases, I have a few really *nice* black shirts!

Both Albert Einstein and Steve Jobs were big believers on not expending brain energy on things that could be relegated to a routine, and I'm all about managing my energy. It seemed to work for them, and it seems to be successful for me as well. Try it out!

**12. Create something embarrassingly bad.** Maya Angelou once said "You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have." So give it a shot! Write a terrible song or poem. Dance badly. Draw a pitiful picture with your left hand. What is it you're trying to do? First do it badly. You'd be amazed at the ideas it can generate.

**13. Go stargazing.** B.J. Miller is a palliative care therapist who has witnessed and helped with more than 1,000 deaths, helping families usher their loved ones through their end-of-life experiences. He's obviously learned a few things about improving the quality of life. His best advice is 'star therapy.'

“When you are struggling with just about anything, look up. Just ponder the night sky for a minute and realize that we’re all on the same planet at the same time. As far as we can tell, we’re the only planet with life like ours on it anywhere nearby. Then you start looking at the stars, and you realize that the light hitting your eye is ancient, [some of the] stars that you’re seeing, they no longer exist by the time that the light gets to you. Just mulling the bare-naked facts of the cosmos is enough to thrill me, awe me, freak me out, and kind of put all my neurotic anxieties in their proper place. A lot of people—when you’re standing at the edge of your horizon, at death’s door, you can be much more in tune with the cosmos.”

I’ve started doing star therapy regularly. Just 10 minutes of soaking in all the magnitude and expanse that lies above my head can help me refocus, reboot, and instill gratitude and perspective.

**14. Take the Paper Clip Test.** One of the best exercises I know to help jumpstart your creative juices is something called the *paper clip test*. It’s quite literally one of the easiest ways to think differently (known as *divergent thinking* in meta-cognition circles). Take a simple paper clip. What can you do with it? I know, I know... you can clip papers together, or you can reset a smoke detector, or... well... that’s about it. Or is it?

Come up with as many ideas as you can— nothing is off limits! It turns out most people can only think of about 10-15 ideas. But not *you*. You're reading this book. You're tuned in to strengthening your creative muscle. You're building a creative tribe. So what can *you* do? It's no surprise that kids do a better job at this than the average adult, but you're not average. By the way, I've seen some people come up with as many as 200 uses! Give it a go! It's a great way to open up your creative thinking and apply it to any project you're struggling with.

**15. Read something inspiring before bed.** Studies show that memory retention increases if sleep “occurs shortly after learning.” Try filling up your head with inspiration, and let your sleeping brain do the rest.

**16. Surround yourself with color.** I've long been fascinated by the effects of color on your mood. Choosing the right color is known to help boost your energy or mood. University of British Columbia study found that **blue** is best at boosting our brain's ability to focus. **Red** is good for boosting physical exertion. **Purple** is associated with spirituality and contemplation. I intentionally painted my studio desk bright **yellow**, because it's known to stimulate positivity, creativity and happiness.

**17. Take a Golf Ball nap.** I was a golfer for about a year. And by 'golfer', I mean I swung a club and hacked up chunks of the course trying to hit this stupid little ball into a tiny hole hundreds of yards away. I was so terrible, it wasn't long before I gave it up. And the Dallas Cowboys Golf Club in Grapevine, Texas was happy when I did. But I've found another use for all those golf balls laying around.

When I lay down for a power nap, I place a golf ball in my hand and let it hang down towards the floor. As I relax, the hand holding the golf ball is the *last* set of muscles to unwind. As soon as I've drifted off enough for the ball to drop to the floor, I get up! All I'm after is that *one moment* when all my muscles reboot and refresh. Try it!

**18. Have some fun.** Stress and pressure to perform is one of the biggest obstacles to my creative thinking. A number of studies conducted in the 1980s found that “creativity and intrinsic interest diminish if task is done for gain.” Relax, have fun, and you’ll find your muse returning with renewed vigor. Remember: *play, don’t work*.

**19. Laugh.** In 1987, psychologists found that “people who watched a comedy film were more likely to solve a problem requiring a creative solution than people who watched a neutral film.” Comedy seems to improve our mental flexibility and creativity because it engages our brains in ways that it does not expect. Take a time out with Netflix or Hulu and watch a funny movie. Anything from *Tommy Boy* to *Anchorman* to *The Blues Brothers*... or a thousand others. Whatever makes you laugh!

**20. Try a new restaurant.** Or fast food joint. Around my hometown, I’m a big fan of our local food trucks. They are the Forrest Gump of cuisine— you never know what you’re gonna get. But it’s *always* amazing. Whatever your choices are, pick something new. Something you’d typically *never* choose and go for it. At a new place, I always ask the staff what their favorite menu item is and choose *that*. Not only have I never been

disappointed, but it also breaks me out of my habit and routine (think of ‘cognitive bias’), and that’s always good for my creativity.

**21. Expose yourself to other industries.** Naturally, we spend most of our time consumed with things within our own expertise. Exploring something completely outside of my own wheelhouse has led me to think about things in completely different ways. When I dip my toes in someone else’s pool, it gives me brand new raw material for my creative brain to play with. It opens my eyes to new connections and possibilities. (One more reason I love my tribe so much is they are a constant source of new expertise I can learn from!)

**22. Work in a new environment.** Duh. Sitting in the same room, staring at the same screen, drinking the same coffee, surrounded by the same walls day after day. Ugh. Enough said. If you can change your location, even temporarily, do it *now*.

**23. Wear different hats.** As a creator, I naturally feel protective over my creations. This, however, sometimes makes me unable to see other perspectives outside of my own. A drama teacher friend suggested I take time to wear a different hat (or glasses) throughout the process. Each costume change was an intentional change of character or perspective that could help me see things differently. As a result, I actually have an assortment of baseball caps, cowboy hats, bifocals, beanies, and things in my studio space. You might feel a little silly (like I did), but it can give you just enough of a jolt to break your pattern of thinking.

**24. Go in the opposite direction.** Ask yourself this question: “If I

was doing this in a completely opposite way, what would that be?” Instead of serious, make it funny. Instead of happy, make it sad. Instead of making it beautiful, make it ugly. The more extreme, the better. Breaking all the rules will lead you to thinking in new and creative ways.

**24. Express yourself in a different medium.** An idea changes every time you express it in a different vehicle. You can talk about how much you love your dog, but if you write a song about how you love your dog, new ideas will emerge. Draw or sketch or even paint what it looks like to be in love with your dog and even *more* ideas will emerge. Simply switching the *medium* can make a huge difference in your creative thinking about a project.

**25. Go to a coffee shop.** If you know me, you know coffee shops are pretty much my Mother Ship. It’s not just the aroma and the huge amounts of legal stimulants. It’s more than that.

The ambient buzz of a coffee shop typically hovers around 70 dB-- just enough noise level to enhance creativity without offering too many distractions. Fortunately, even if you can’t make it to a coffee shop, with websites and apps like *Coffitivity* you’re never more than a few clicks away from a great soundtrack to enhance your creative hours.

**25. Collaborate with someone unlike you.** We all tend to hang around with, and attract, other people who are similar to us. But some of the best creative jolts I’ve gotten have come from people who are wildly different from me. Different political views and philosophies. Different musical styles and job backgrounds.

Different ethnicities and religious beliefs. Creativity, as in real life, benefits from diversity.

**26. Work at your least alert time of the day.** Sleepiness causes you to become unable to focus properly. That's a bad idea if you're driving across the country, but not quite so terrible if you're trying to jumpstart your creativity. If you're a night owl, try waking up early to get some work done – and vice versa. *This is one of the reasons I love Morning Pages. As a night owl, my mind is not quite fully awake yet so it's incredibly insightful to get to writing as soon after waking as possible. I've discovered things I would have never unearthed if I was fully awake.*

**27. Learn the 'yes, and..' rule of improvisation.** I absolutely *love* good stand-up comedy. Especially *improv*. An actor friend of mine says the key to successful improv is saying, "yes, and..." to whatever happens. If someone in an improv routine hands you an imaginary wand and says, "Now be a *magician*", you simply respond with "Yes, and... I'll turn you into a pig!" Or "Yes, and my magic powers come from these golden shoelaces!" Or whatever. The point is "yes, and..." keeps everything moving forward, building momentum without giving anyone time to second guess your decisions.

**28. Try spending the day speaking only in questions.** It sounds tough but the possibilities are endless. Have you tried it? Do you think you could pull it off for a whole day? What do you think is holding you back? Fear? Couldn't you try it and see what happens? Even in the drive thru at McDonalds? Do you have Dr.

Pepper? Can I have extra fries? Don't you think it might be a fun 'game' to play one day? Did you realize I'm only talking in questions now?

See what I did there?

See what I'm still doing?

**29. Just observe.** Spend the day in silence. Don't talk to anyone. Get out into the world and just listen.

**30. Hang out with creative people.** With the advent of a little thing called *the internet*, there's really no excuse *not* to be connected to other creative people on the planet. Take a deep breath, gather your courage, and ask one of them, "Can we grab lunch/coffee/whatever sometime soon? I'd really like hear what you think about (insert creative idea or topic here)." Chances are they'll jump at the opportunity. If not, move on to someone else. The Universe is full of us. And we're ready for you.

**31. Keep asking 'what if'.** What if are mobile phone screens were half their size? What if my shoes had their own wifi? What if I could grow apples that tasted like cinnamon? What if I lived

underground? What if my bedroom ceiling was one big movie screen?

Ok, that last one sounds pretty awesome, I have to admit. But if you can keep asking ‘what if’, you can open up all kinds of new possibilities. It’s probably one of my top favs.

**32. Learn to ride a bike...backwards.** Just, you know... because. But beware, it’s harder than you think it is.

**33. Play a new board game.** Pick up something new and interesting you’ve never played before. You know, something like ‘*Exploding Kittens*’.

**34. Get lost.** In today’s world, it’s hard to get lost. Cell phones and GPS devices make it nearly impossible, but taking a drive or walk into a new area can really open up your eyes and ears... and ultimately your creative mind. You can always use your GPS to get back home. But be safe!

**35. Have an idea journal.** Having a record of all my half-baked ideas helps give me a resource to go to when I need something. I

can look down the list I've made and remember my inspiration.

Some, like starting my own coffee label or writing a song about my daughter, are great inspirational places to revisit. Others, like "try living only on orange juice for 14 days" are terrible ideas. Hey, they can't *all* be gold. Besides, Leonardo da Vinci reportedly had lots of notebooks filled with random reflections and ideas. If it's good enough for him...

**36. Set a deadline.** It easy to be all *romantic* about creativity and

it's process. "*Relax. Just get in touch with the Muse... let the creativity just flow...*" And, yeah, that's pretty awesome. But it's

also realistic to realize that being on a deadline makes things happen. I've struggled with finishing songs or writing projects until the client/co-writer says, "I need this by this weekend." And by some magical, mystical, muse-ical miracle it gets finished. And not just finished, but it becomes something I'm proud of. So, suffice I to say, I have a love-hate relationship with deadlines. And by 'love-hate relationship' with deadlines, I mean *I hate deadlines*. But obviously they're helpful for me. And they're probably helpful for you, too.

**37. Plant a garden.** With everything in our world growing more and more *instant*, slowing down and unplugging helps me see the world in a fresher way. Create a small garden in whatever space you can—a backyard, a windowsill, or a collection of planters on your back patio. There's something therapeutic about sunshine, fresh air, and dirty hands... Plus, you might grow something good

to eat!

**38. Babysit.** If you don't have small kids at home, ask a trusted friend if you can babysit for a couple of hours. Whatever the child wants to play, jump in and play along. Build with Legos™. Play with Play-Doh™. Draw with crayons. Climb a tree. Watch SpongeBob. I guarantee it will spark some new ideas in your adult brain.

**39. Roll the dice.** Carry along a pair of dice in your pocket. When faced with a decision, let fate decide. I've rolled the dice on places to eat, music to listen to, movies to watch, food to order, and road trips to take. Let Luck be a lady!

**40. Make a Jumpstart Jar.** As you've gone through this book, I'm sure it's sparked some ideas. Write down the ideas listed here, along with your own ideas, on slips of paper and place them in an empty jar. When you're feeling stuck, pull one out and go with it.

## AFTERWORD: CREATIVITY UNLEASHED

In the movie *Hitch*, Alex Hitchens, played by Will Smith, takes Sara on a date to Ellis Island. The whole date is one train wreck after another. As they're riding jet skis in the Hudson River, Smith's jet ski sucks up a dirty diaper and dies out. He then tries to climb onto her jet ski and accidentally kicks her in the head, leaving an enormous bruise on her forehead and knocking her into the water.

When they finally get to Ellis Island, Smith shows her a signature of her great-great-grandfather, thinking it would be a romantic and thoughtful moment. As she breaks into tears, she tells Smith that her great-great-grandfather was a murderer and felon—a horrible legacy the family has tried for years to forget about. Finally, as she rides away in a cab at the end of the date, Smith's shirt gets stuck in the cab door and is ripped off as the car drives away.

That night, Sara, played by Eva Mendez, tells her friend, Casey, "It was fun. In a disastrous kind of way." She points to the huge bruise on her forehead.

"I mean, this isn't exactly a *hickey*..." she grinned.

“Wait, wait. You’re seeing him again?”, Casey asks.

“You said that I’m always expecting men to let me down, right? Assuming that they’re gonna fail?” Sara responds.

“Which he did.”

“Yeah...” she adds, “but he did it with *flair*. I mean, Casey, he really...*tanked*.”

“And that’s a desirable trait...?”, Casey asks.

“Yeah. Weird, huh?”

Archaeologists say that the earliest recognizable evidence of human art is 40,000 years old. And the earliest evidence of human agriculture is merely 10,000 years old.

Chew on that. How can that be possible? What does that even mean? It means that somewhere along the way, we decided that it was way more important to learn how to make creative things that weren’t essential to our human survival, than it was to learn how to regularly feed ourselves.

We don't need art to live. We don't need creative *things* in our lives in order to survive in the same sense that we need food, water, shelter and companionship.

Or do we?

Why then would we have seemingly pursued the act of making things and expressing ourselves for 30,000 years, all the while letting the whole idea of growing-food-so-we-can-eat take the evolutionary backburner?

As surely as I'm typing these words on my computer screen, I believe this one, overarching statement about creativity: We need beauty just as much as we need bread. I'm not exactly why that's so, but I have an idea.

We create things, make things, because we *have* to. We *must*. It's your job and mine to get out there or in there or up there or down there and do the work. Make. Build. Plant. Sing. Dance. Skate. Draw. Paint. Cook. Write. Post. *Whatever* your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. Your creativity is the Great Creator's gift to you. What you do with it, is your gift to the rest of the world.

It's not about *good*. It's about the making. It's about what creativity does to *us* in the process. Creating. Playing. Building. Designing. Exploring. And doing it with *flair*.

So, go. I'll see you out there.

Tom



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Cottar is an author, singer/songwriter, performer, worship leader, and lover of coffee. He loves fishing, motorcycling and all things creative, artistic, loud, and caffeinated. You can find all his writing and recording projects on iTunes, Amazon, social media and all over the world, but you can only get the Tom Cottar Music Coffee on Facebook (It's kind of a secret thing...). He and his wife, Heather, have three kids, one dog and an assortment of guitars, coloring books, drums, journals, notebooks, and boxes of crayons at their home near Austin, Texas.

