

YOU CREATIVE

James Hegarty

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“Stand up” drawing by Anna Hegarty

*Creativity is a river of many waters;
pigments of every shade flowing together,
touching the landscape, watering it, nurturing it,
changing it.*

These are the colors I have seen.

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Preface

You wanna be startin' something.



What does it mean to be an artist? For hundreds of years we have thought about this. From the earliest of times, we have expressed ourselves in ways that search for meaning and really dig deep to express the things we can't really say in ordinary language. To be an artist is to express something individual, something no one else has seen or learned. We are inventors, explorers, hypothesizers, investigators, researchers, and originators. We are in the business of imagining. We imagine. And then we do it. Artists make the world what it is and what it will be.

The way I look at this creativity thing is that everyone has the ability to be an artist. The underlying quality is to have an idea and to do whatever you can to make that idea into something real. Period. Ideas made real. That what artists do. And I think everyone has that ability.

That's what this book is about. It's about how do we get to the point of thinking we really are an artist? How do we get to the point of being confident that this is our identity, this what we do? How do we get the conviction that we can do this? How do we learn to trust ourselves? And maybe most important of all, how do we learn to believe in ourselves?

Practice, repetition, experience. When everything is new and we've never done something before, it's pretty natural to fear the unknown. We keep wondering, "what's going to happen, what's going to break, what deep dark pit will I fall into today?" But travel the path a few times, work through that game level, and the steps, the moves, the things to avoid, and most importantly the assurance that if I do something that worked before, it will work again – that changes things. It's that sense of knowing the drill that makes all the difference.

That's what this book is about. It is a book about a journey, about a search, and about discovery. It's about jumping into the stream and swimming. The first time is going to be bumpy, uncertain, shaky, maybe even kind of hard. The most I can do is encourage, and say, "yes, I know, I've been there, too." That's what these chapters are, really. A little bit of companionship along the way. Your journey won't be the same as mine. But maybe the crazy, sometimes insanely stupid things that tried to put road blocks in my way, will show you that whatever dragons or evil monsters pop out of the woods in your experience, are fundamentally no different than what happened to me, or that happens to anyone else who steps out onto this road. Knowing that we're all dealing

with the same basic set of “challenges” helps get through it.

In total, “Roots” is about finding the rich fertile soil where your creativity, your artistry, can grow and flourish, and keep getting bigger and more beautiful all the time.

The analogy is pretty clear, I think. Creativity and artistry starts as a sprout, a tiny green thing just barely visible. But we all know there’s a lot more going on beneath the surface. Down in the soil, the roots are soaking up water and nutrients, inspiration and experience, that give the tree what it needs to grow taller, broader, and stronger. Our artist’s roots are what this book is about. It is about discovering that we are capable of navigating a multilayered process of creating and producing, imagining and making. Our roots are our experience learning about ourselves, shaping ourselves, and then learning to trust ourselves in our ability, to begin to have conviction that we actually can be creative and come up with ideas, solutions and insights, and that our imagination is rich and deep. It is about realizing that we can truly believe in ourselves as artists.

So let’s get our hands dirty, lets dig in. Whatever idea presents itself, go after it and follow it where it leads. And do it again. And again. Along the way, probably without noticing, the voices of uncertainty, doubt, and self-criticism will stop shouting at you all the time. It won’t be long before you start to feel like you’ve got some moves, you’ve been here before, you can do this. Conviction. You will have made your roots.

James Hegarty
Waterman Place
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Get up, stand up

The momentum of ideas.



People tell you there's a line, drawn somewhere in the dirt, that divides those that should be artists from those that shouldn't. I had that line drawn in my mind. I don't know where it came from. I don't know who put it there, and I don't know when it first appeared. All I know is that it hung over me for years and years. It was the supreme question – am I an artist or not. It took all kinds of forms. Thoughts like, the music is not good, no one likes this stuff, it's not like Phil Collins. The list goes on and on.

That's what got me to this place, now almost 25 years ago, when I really thought I had crossed the line, that it was time to give it all up. Stop making music.

But I just couldn't quit, even though that evil conventional wisdom told me I probably should. It was hard because that's what I really cared about, that was me. I was 100% music and without it I really didn't know what life would be like. It was pretty scary, actually, but I really didn't know what to do.

I was at a point in my journey as a composer and musician that looked very much like a lonely rest stop out in the middle of Nevada. I was pulled over, waiting for something to happen. But there was only a vast emptiness around me. Nothing, nada. It was going to be a long wait.

I had written a number of works, some had received airplay or performances, but overall there just wasn't anything happening. I needed to do something bold enough that it would attract some attention, make some noise, and get my career going. I needed to do something that really mattered, to me, and to everyone else.

I gave myself one more try. So I set out to find some kind of composition that would give me a shot at redemption, something that I could look back on and no matter how it turned out, I would know that I had given it my all.

I went in fully realizing that this would be either the beginning or the end and I was willing to accept that. It was an act of sheer desperation. Like grabbing a parachute and throwing myself out of a burning airplane, the decision to write an opera was born of a primordial need to survive. I just jumped.

Almost immediately I found out that even though I had written a ton of music, there were a lot of things that I didn't know. Like, I wasn't very good at writing for singers. Yes, seriously.

So I studied scores and researched what other composers had to say about writing for

voice. I wrote little test pieces and asked my friends to sing them. One of my friends was willing to take the time to go through these fragments with me and explain why certain passages worked and others didn't. Gradually, the insights and experience began to reach something of a critical mass and these little experiments started to work.

Many times I would have to stop and learn new skills or gain new knowledge to overcome my own inabilities – regroup, reconsider, revise. It was one big fat “learning experience” after another. And it was a grand adventure.

Completing the opera was a journey uncharted and uncertain. Each step was an experiment without a user's manual. There were no guideposts to help me across the frontier, nothing to show the way around the peaks and ridges. It took all my energy and resources to discover the bridges that crossed the chasms of my own inability, doubt, fear, and limited perceptions.

Each crossing was another milestone, another level of insight and understanding, ability and knowledge. Reaching ahead, grasping at the next thing. Trying hard to discern what should happen next.

Surviving. Hanging in and staying ahead of the discouragement and distractions that are always trying to tear everything down.

Looking back now from a distance of 20 years it is clear to me that yes, I bet the farm. But it wasn't the end. The opera received a National Endowment for the Arts grant for a production in New York City and has received several follow-up productions. In a very real and practical sense, it has been the basis of everything that I've done since.

All the things that I've learned and all the work that I've done have their roots in that project. In every way, it was the beginning.

Who am I, what do I stand for, what makes me risk it all?

That's a hard question. It's complicated.

Identity. Maybe it's the most unanswerable of all questions. But we have to give it a go. Figuring this out is more than a little intimidating because it means making a commitment. It's taking a position and holding it. It's putting down a mark that declares what we stand for, what we believe in, and what we think is valid – even what we love and cherish and hope for. It is the exposing of our deepest true being.

We can shape identity. Identity becomes tangible and real to us through the choices we make in our lives. Most importantly, we have the ability to shape our identity beyond the random acts of our own daily past and present. We must frame our identity not by what others have done to us but by what we ourselves choose to do, by what we select to adopt as having value and significance.

This means we not only can, but should, focus on developing a rich and multifaceted sense of identity. Opportunities to expand creative identity are abundant, they surround us every day. It's always tempting to think that important opportunities or the next big thing are out there somewhere in the distance, in a place we have to reach hard for. But instead of seeing the circumstances of the present as a liability, look more closely and discover the potential that is here right now. The spark that ignites new dimensions of creative identity is already at hand, we just need to be more discerning of the potential.

While my decision to write an opera pushed my compositional abilities far beyond the level I had at the beginning, I did not go into the project completely ungrounded. At the time I started the opera project, I had worked for eight years in symphony orchestra

concert operations where I had produced hundreds of large-scale musical events. That was my day job. The abilities that I needed to achieve the production of my own event were already present in my daily experience. The decision to write the opera seemed radically extreme from a musical perspective, but from a production perspective it was in line with what I was doing every day. My production experience was the potential that was close at hand. After working that job several years, I finally realized that the experience I gained from my “day job” was what would help me accomplish the next step in my career as a musician.

Identity is founded at the intersection between the reality of our experience, the possibilities we seek, and the potential we discern. There were literally hundreds of symphony orchestra operations managers in the country at that time, but how many of them chose to use their experience as the basis of a self-produced, NEA funded opera? That the pieces fell together for me in that situation is an example of the individuality of identity. The individuality that was expressed in the composition and production of my opera represented a myriad of choices, decisions, and experiences that were mine alone.

But for each of us, the potential is there, we just have to look for it. Identity is supremely within our control. It takes insight and discernment to discover the opportunities present in our experience and it takes commitment and dedication to translate those potentials into tangible ideas and works. In the end, it is a recursive process. The decisions and choices that factor into the accomplishment of the endeavor sharply and powerfully define our identity going forward.

Our work is valuable, even essential. It just might be the answer we all need. This value, this potential, makes it even more essential that each of us discover, fully comprehend, and commit to, our identity. At the core is the one primal, essential question: who are you? Our identity becomes the foundation of a trajectory that enables our work to reach out to all the world, raise us up – and change us.

So take some time, take some time...as complicated as it is, figuring this out is supremely important.

The opera kick-started my professional career in music partly because it demonstrated that I had the capabilities to successfully compose and produce a large-scale work; it proved I had the chops and skills necessary to make great work happen.

But the reason it attracted attention was because it expressed my unique identity, it was a statement that transcended the frame of the music itself. The expression of the idea, guided by an understanding of identity, gave the work a level of significance that was higher than simply another generic composition by a young unknown composer. The power of the work was its reflection of my commitment to an individual sense of identity.

The most important thing the opera achieved was something no one ever really saw. It was the process through which I discovered my identity and developed the means to express it through my work. This foundational basis of individual creative ability that I refined and mastered in the composition and production of that work, has carried forward into everything I have done since.

Are you experienced?

The world is our own personal inspiration lab.



I'm a crate digger. I have a habit. It just started one day. I used to spend a lot of time in record stores. That's just something I've always done.

I don't think my wife knows.

This is how it happened: In the days when I was a kid, every town had a record shop. So even before I could drive, I could walk to the record store downtown and rummage through the albums, look at the photos and drool over the band's gear, read the back covers, and imagine actually buying the thing. And then maybe I'd buy a 45 for ninety-nine cents.

Even today, what often gets me through the week is telling myself that I can stop and look for some tunes on Friday afternoon. Maybe even buy something. At least see what's new. Maybe dig up one of the old classics I'm hunting for. Maybe there's a new reissue of an obscure Coltrane disk I've never heard – there's a lot of unusual Coltrane stuff out there. Any of that would be tempting, indeed.

The biggest retailers of recorded music in my city are now two locally owned stores that specialize in vinyl. Yes, records. So what is it about vinyl? What's with that?

Vinyl's different. Vinyl's the blues, or Monk. Vinyl is a gut-level experience. Can't pirate that. The vinyl experience is not about the content. The thing that makes record stores survive is the vibe, the undeniable coolness, the feeling of being hip just because you're there, the atmosphere, the look, the feel, the smell of dusty history, the weight of real analog expressivity, the impact of so much greatness and beauty and stunning originality in one place in its original form.

Originality. The real deal. The source. The oracle. The well. The real true fragments of a living and breathing culture – not copies, not miniature simulations, not digital replications, not downloads, the actual thing, man. Real, tangible hard knocks street cred. This album is the one; it was there. It's survived the years. Traded, sold for drugs, then sold for groceries, given away – “Please take all you want, I don't have the space anymore...” <sighs and looks away>

It's the one that other stuff copies. The one that shows up in Internet searches for cover art. And now, it's here, right in my hand. At peace, resting now after a long and mysterious journey.

A record store is a museum where you can actually pick up stuff, look at it, and then take it home. To a large extent, it's about the thing, the object itself. Any Miles album is

going to be cool. Sure, My Favorite Things is amazing in the dark, but anything by Coltrane is going to have enough relationship potential to be wrapped up and put on the car seat next to you for the drive home.

So is it about the art and the music, or is it about the vinyl? All of it, actually. Linked together in one unified statement. One infused grain of pure, undiluted, un-digitally-compressed, real-world analog inspirational goodness. This stuff lasts because what's going on here is a lot greater than the content – greater than simply the musical content stamped into the polymer. No matter how cool and even enriching or captivating or inspiring or life changing that content is. It's nothing compared to this: This object, this very thing in my hand, has lived the life it claims to express.

It doesn't represent culture. It is culture. A real, tangible piece of the fabric itself. A fragment. An artifact. A verification that all those rumors and beliefs and hopes are actually true. It is possible to survive time – and fear and fire and flood – to arrive here in this moment, intact.

It is the dream. Alive and realized. It's the human search for truth encapsulated in a microcosm. It's the breath and sweat and blood of the ages overcome and transcended in the immense dignity of one humble thing. Here, right now.

Experienced.

The search for inspiration is the search for originality that is established within a purely expressed identity. Identity is inherently singular, unequalled, and authentic when it doesn't fall back on the generic stuff – the words, chords, and shapes – that's mindlessly floating around in the space outside ourselves. Authentic is not in those external things.

It is inside, in a place that no one else has, a place that is entirely our own – our individual experience, our own personal identity. Why distort or blur that identity with exterior reference? Why compromise the power of individuality for the sake of playing to a genre or trying to be as good as, or just like, something that's already out there?

Originality is the unwavering, riveted focus of our vision latched on to the purest, most concentrated expression of our identity possible – without distractions of any kind, pleasant, easy, or completely inappropriate. Originality requires an unflinching willingness to adhere to our vision, to our identity, even when the expectations of style or opportunity might suggest a little compromise wouldn't hurt too much.

It has been said, over and over, that it is impossible to sit down and write a song with the singular objective of crafting a hit. The constraints of trying to figure out what someone else is going to hear in the music is so limiting that the entire process falls apart, nothing gets written. The way to write a hit is to write and write and write. And stop thinking about whether the song will be a hit or not.

So how does that work? Writing a non-hit that becomes a hit?

Originality connects. It forges connections that no one has even envisioned yet. It's not about trying to find the right words that someone else wants to hear. It is about trying to find the words that most accurately say what needs to be said according to our own individual vision, our own unique view of the world as it is and should be.

And when the words are authentic, they will be powerful. And people will pay attention. It won't matter if they are words no one has ever thought of before on their own. They will adopt them as their own, anyway. They will become their own. They

will become accepted as the expression of a collective vision.

Why? Because pure honest expression touches people with intensity of direct connection. It is powerful because it is enormously profound. Pure honest communication, heart to heart is the very center of the human existence.

Ideas that result from deep, completely honest searching, the discoveries and insights that present themselves in the middle of the night in the dark corners of some lost and forgotten alley of memory, or an unnervingly new experience, are going to be powerful. They are going to connect and transmit. And they are going to last. Unique, powerful ideas remain great – for all time.

What's the shelf life of great art? What's the shelf life of inspiration?

It's like vinyl, the stuff survives. It lives and breaths on it's own. It becomes its own identity with its own history and its own relationships. Like a well-loved sweater that keeps ending up back at the Salvation Army store to be bought again and again by successive owners.

Timeless. Separate. Transcendent of the cultural vernacular. And at the same time completely relevant. It jumps right over the question of popularity and establishes itself as a basic need. It defines its own relevance. Ideas whisper or shout without regard and without respect to any expectations. They push forward, open new perspectives, establish new pathways, lead thought and action into places never before envisioned.

Ideas are at once both supremely universal and elegantly separate. Ideas connect on their own terms. They engage, they inspire, they reveal the unknown to us – with words and gestures that we can understand, somehow both familiar and new. Ideas express a chorus of deep human interaction. They communicate at an intimately personal level and fill arenas with the biggest, baddest displays of spectacle. Ideas connect with a subtle one-on-one gut-level impulse that doesn't go away and yet seems like it's always been there, somewhere inside. Ideas are an entire universe of hot, electrifying connections rubbing and bumping and leaving traces – cross currents blending and realigning.

Ultimately, ideas generate works that tell their own story. A story that's bigger and broader and richer and more passionate than any single vision can ever be.

So do it. Be experienced. Expand vision and push inspiration to the next level. And the next. Make stuff that has a life of its own, that moves far beyond the confines of cultural borders and limited expectations. Make stuff that has its own identity that has been grown and nurtured in the ground of real experience. Make stuff that goes beyond representin' to actually bein'. Stuff that actually lives the life.

This stuff transcends time and space, speaks all languages, hears all words, understands all hopes, loves each one of us.

Deeply. Respectfully. Compassionately.

Authentically.

We're gonna want it. With a passion.

Good vibrations

Content is a groovy thing, baby.



When I returned to Chicago to do grad work at the conservatory, I started spending my free time between music lessons by walking the galleries of the Art Institute across the street. At the time, the Marc Chagall stained glass window was a new acquisition and it was creating a lot of buzz. When I first saw it, the piece epitomized everything that I loved in Chagall's work. It blew me away with its vivid color, scale, and dramatic boldness. It kept drawing me in, day after day. I found myself spending more and more time in front of the work, soaking up the intensity, feeling the energy.

So what is the work saying? Beyond the surface layer of sounds or colors, content communicates the vision and purpose that sparked the idea's inspiration at its inception. Within every idea are multiple layers of meaning and purpose. It is up to us to articulate these messages upwards through the layers of structure and materials.

In *Break the Rules* I wrote about a life-changing concert I attended at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra when I was young. It was 1973 and the concert featured the seminal 20th century work, *Concerto for Orchestra*, by Béla Bartók. I was completely blown away. It literally rocked my world in a most literal sense. Why was I so plugged in to that performance so many years ago? Why were so many people checked out? In fact, why were so many of the people in Orchestra Hall that night sound asleep? I couldn't figure it out at the time. But now I know, after working hundreds of symphony events over the years, it happens all the time. A board member once told me, "I love to come to the symphony; I get my best sleep here."

How can this experience be so vastly different for so many people?

It's not Bartók's fault. Some work is more demanding of the audience than others. For many, Bartók is just a bridge too far. So be it.

But it's important to shape content with eyes wide open. People will fall asleep, or walk away, if they don't have the means to connect with the content of an idea. It gets back to the vision and purpose thing. When voice is rooted in vision and purpose, it packages the message into a context that provides access points of connection to the work – that are appropriate to the intended users. The Bartók does this. Clearly it connects with a substantial number of musicians, conductors, and audience members in the symphony scene. And the outsiders or wannabes that completely miss it? I suspect that they fell outside the parameters of his vision and purpose.

Content is fun. After years of music school, I can do content. It's the part of creativity that is most direct. But at the same time, it's the least controlled. It's way too easy to get seduced away from an authentic reflection of identity with a passing style of the moment. It's tempting to think that it really wouldn't hurt to give in to just a few "new" trends and latch on to a couple of clichés. Everyone is doing it.

I have a closet full of ties and almost all of them are hideous. There is the pencil thin pink satin tie I wore at my brother-in-law's wedding, clown-size four-inch wide gaudy paisley things I keep around for a laugh, and the uncharacteristically proper British woolen plaids I bought on a college trip to England. The content is all over the map and most of it is totally useless.

That's not at all a groovy way to express creative voice.

When voice reflects vision and purpose, the resulting content is not only authentic and honest, it's consistent and unique. The more creative identity is part of the mix, the more individuality will be expressed. When the content is individual and unique, it won't be stigmatized by the tropes of dated styling. And the creative ideas we're working so hard on won't end up being old news before we even get them out the door.

Creative ideas don't need to be time stamped by dated techniques and stylistic clichés. Great ideas usually are timeless and when the content is crafted to reflect identity, rather than passing fashion, the content and connections will be authentic and lasting.

I developed an experiment. An experiment in understanding voice. My plan was to see what would happen if I really seriously experienced Chagall's window on a regular basis over a long period of time. I didn't know how long I would be able to keep at it but I resolved that I would stick with it for as long as I could.

As it turns out, I was able to keep at it for more than four years – through my time at the conservatory and on into some of the years I worked at Orchestra Hall across the street.

What initially drew me in was its size. Bigness really does command attention, large statements captivate, no doubt about that. Without the attraction of bold colors and scale, I might have been drawn to a different piece. But very early on, that raw impression of scale diminished and I began to see it as something more like a book, more like something that had many facets that were inter-related but at the same time were easy to grab and engage with.

Bigness makes a majestic statement, to be sure, which draws us in, initially. But what makes us stick with it, or come back and try again, are the facets that are more personal and tangible, that are scaled to fit our hand and our eye – our human point of reference.

Immense and human, at the same time. That's where levels of intimacy come in. It's the small moments, the nuanced shadings of color that make immediate connections with our own individuality and become a part of us.

As I sit here now decades later, entirely from memory I can vividly recall the little fragments of scenes scattered all over the piece. The characters flying together, the sky and moon. I remember the first time I discovered that the color was fused onto both the front and rear surfaces of the glass, and how all of a sudden the piece became three-dimensional with layers in the foreground and background. I was surprised how really

thick the glass was. I remember the details, the precision, the hand drawn roughness of the lines, the almost painterly shadings of color. The size and colors drew me. But the message kept pulling me back – even now, decades later.

Now, as I think back on my little experiment that just gradually faded away as the demands of my job overtook my lunch hours, I recall again how significant it was, that time spent looking into a window. The moments spent in those galleries were of an equal importance to the technical studies I was pursuing across the street in composition, orchestration, and theory.

It was there, in those galleries that I soaked up inspiration and insights that have carried forward with me throughout my life. The conservatory fed my skills, but there is no doubt that the experiences I had with the beauty and nuances of this and other works of art in the museum nurtured my inner being, my identity.

It will forever be true: technique is only the tool, it's the soul that has something to say.

Red pill or blue pill?

Choose awesomeness over perfection.



Yeah, decisions. Yeesh. Don't you hate 'em? Just when everything's going along pretty well, something happens and there's a fork in the road. Go left? Go right? Or somewhere else. Questions arise. Or some stupid thing breaks and needs to be replaced. Or some opportunity comes along that looks pretty interesting, but it means leaving the mother ship and going it alone.

And then all of a sudden everything stops. And nothing gets done. For how long? It seems like an eternity. Sitting around looking at the options. Adding up the pros and cons. Evaluating the consequences. Searching for a reliable way to predict the future, without even a decent crystal ball.

The problem isn't the decision itself, it's the uncertainty. What if I make the wrong decision? What if this doesn't work? What if it's all going to seem stupid, later?

Choose carefully. The room's full of options and at least some of them are not what they appear to be. It can get disorienting. Choice sounds like a good time, right? He's cool, charming, filled with possibility and hope, great clothes, great hair, all the good stuff.

But what about Doubt? Doubt is dark and emo. He's gonna tie you up and torment you slowly with sharp little pricks and burns.

Let's face it, we're working that room constantly. We're making choices about everything from accepting or rejecting an offer, to selecting materials, to trying to figure out how much to charge for something completely intangible and priceless, like our work. Every one of these decisions has a flip side and every one of them isn't going to work out fabulously. Some of these decisions are going to crash and burn. And those are the ones that are going to invite Doubt in for a drink. And a little intimate conversation may ensue. Maybe a few innocent questions like, "What if," or, "Why didn't you?"

The evil twin of all those delightful choices can start to push everything down. It can suck the life out of the work by questioning the integrity of everything that is going on. It's torture time. Pretty dark, indeed.

Is there ever a time when the future always turns out perfect? Yeah, probably not. So why does it seem like every decision has to result in perfection when we know that's impossible? On the front side, we believe every decision has an ultimately successful conclusion. It just requires enough due diligence to find it. The supremely, abundantly

perfect, answer is there, if we keep looking long enough or hard enough. Right?

Maybe. But how long does it take? And how really awful or disastrous is it going to be if the decision turns out to be only half good? The whole production, maybe my whole life is sitting around in limbo while I'm obsessing at a granular level about the "what ifs" of a decision that five years from now – indeed maybe two weeks from now – could be entirely immaterial.

How many decisions have I sweat bullets over that I can't even remember now? It's a completely ludicrous number, actually. Time and effort was expended disproportionately to the eventual impact. And it's more than that, there's the emotional angst, the strum und drung of hand wringing that goes into it.

Talk about distraction! Climbing back out of the emotional muck of a deep, dark mental decision-making session isn't the way I want to start my day. It's counter productive and I know it. There's got to be a better way.

It's Monday morning. Everyone knows what should have happened to win the game. The right moves, the right plays, the right timing. The right decisions are now completely obvious. Now that it's all over. And looking back, things could have turned out very differently, right?

The presumption is that things could have turned out better. That track could have been a hit. If only I'd mixed the vocals hotter. But who really knows. History, the past, is frozen. The players are all only going to do one thing. We can sit here now, viewing the scene in replay and know how to make better moves, more brilliant decisions. I can clearly see myself as totally amazing while everyone else is just doing the same stupid thing, over and over.

Groundhog Day revisited. But we're not actually Bill Murray. And that was a movie, remember? There's no certainty that every other part of the equation, every other person, every other factor of the process would have functioned in exactly the same way had we made a different decision. If we had cut left, the competition would have, too. And maybe, actually probably, things could have gone even worse.

It's hard to get there, but in reality, the decisions made in the heat of the moment probably are the best ones possible. It's no surprise real life is a dynamic, fluid, ever changing and unpredictable soup. But the deeper we go into the subjective analysis of a decision, the more it seems like the only variable is the one we're focused on. It seems like everything else is a given. And that's just not true. Everything is variable. And everything is in a state of equilibrium. Change part A and part B is going to react, compensate, find a balance. It's impossible to predict stuff like that.

Big decisions. Real intersections of intent. How do you get past that point of uncertainty without a disturbing encounter with Mr. Doubt on a dark lonely road?

Do the homework, get the facts, experiment, test, ask questions, evaluate the potentials and liabilities, try to find out what others have done in similar situations.

But there's also the part they didn't talk about in management training. Align the decision to the purpose of the work, to vision and identity. Choice reflects vision. Clear vision leads to clear decisions. When the decision is rooted in the foundation of the inspiration, the basis is a deeper logic than simply due diligence. When I know that a decision was made from an intrinsic connection to the purpose and inspiration of the work, that's a basis I can trust.

And even if everything turns sour later, I can live with that. I can live with it because the burden of logic and reason was deeper than my own intellect – the burden was born by the power of the work itself. And that's a lot stronger than I am on my own.

Doubt is always going to try to take us down. So don't go there. And the next time Mr. Doubt shows up at the door, don't even open it. What makes decision making so hard is the fear of the unknown. The uncertainty of the future. The suspicion that most decisions don't turn out as planned. The expectation that there must be one, perfect, right direction – that there is only one way for things to succeed. It's natural to want to avoid the doubt. But it's more than that. We need to avoid anything that compromises our self-confidence and ability to act swiftly and decisively.

It's important, vital, to maintain a high level of forward motion. Keep up the momentum. Keep working. Make sure decisions are aligned with the core, the vision, of the work. Consider each decision from the basis of identity. Make the decision. Hit the GO button. And don't look back. Clean up the mess, if it happens. Don't stop for anything. Keep this whole crazy circus train in motion.

I went down to the crossroads

Vision reinvented.



I was a commercial music producer throughout most of the 1980s. At the beginning of the decade, United Airlines employed a real orchestra to play the chopped up versions of Rhapsody in Blue that they used in their television commercials.

And yes, United Airlines had enough money to pay for television advertising then. It's telling that the musicians they hired for the recording sessions were mainly of members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, an organization that was, at the time, the highest paid in the country.

So it took real money, and real ink and paper to make music.

I started out in the world of commercial music as an arranger. I wrote out the music the studio musicians would play. Having everything written down and planned out saved a lot of time and it made everyone look like gods in front of the client. "Man you guys really nailed that track!" First or second take, everyone goes home early. Money saved. In the studio, speed is everything.

Drummers had it especially good. Everyone needed a drummer. There were no stupid drum machines then. At first, to my knowledge there were only three synthesizers in Chicago. They were rare and expensive beasts. Considered mainly useful for sound effects, space-age whooshes and goofy noises. Or the standard synthesizer music bed that always ended up sounding like the Doctor Who theme. Of course.

Sometimes cool but very limited. Musicians were still working.

But by the mid-1980s the number of music producers in Chicago had quadrupled. It seemed like just about anyone who owned one of the newly affordable synthesizers such as a DX-7 or, better yet, a Mirage was doing tracks. At home, without a studio bill and without musicians. Ouch.

I knew session players that went from doing four or five sessions a day to one or two sessions per week. The arranging gigs dried up, too, because no one hired real players any more. Once the Emulator came out, it was pretty much all over.

It's kind of startling to reduce nine years of work down to a trajectory that can be described in just a few sentences. But the fact is, in an environment where time and money are so inextricably linked, anything that could rebalance that equation was going to have a drastic impact on the whole scene.

To be fair, the economy had tanked. Black Monday, October 19, 1987. I can still remember the radio announcer's voice on the car radio reporting the market stats as my

partner and I drove to an appointment with one of our clients. Things got ugly, really fast.

All those mediocre electronically generated tracks would never have seen the light of day if the agencies had any clients with money. But they didn't, and the need to meet microscopic budgets propelled the success of producers with synthesizers just as much, if not more, than the availability of relatively inexpensive technology.

It was an interesting era to witness. In the slowmo of real life experience, all those sessions and all those tracks seemed like such a sure thing. There was no big bang. Just a long slow fade. I started to buy gear. I started to record projects in the den. I started to have to cut my rates to compete. I started to do a lot more free demos. And eventually the work just didn't make money anymore.

One day, I walked out of the house and got a day job so I could pay the bills.

Let's think about this as an adjustment, a service update, perhaps; fix a few bugs and add a few new features. That doesn't sound so bad, does it?

External forces. We're dealing with them all the time. That's just the way it is. When paradigms shift and new circumstances arise, it shoves stuff around, redistributes relationships, and modifies the landscape. New ways come forward and some old ways fade in irrelevance. External forces can hit us hard, make a huge impact on our lives and our work. When the effect is rapid and negative, as in overnight "market corrections" or the arrival of unanticipated technological innovations (used Fairlight, anyone?), the impact can be devastating. It can break the foundation of a small enterprise that's barely hanging on.

When I walked out of the house that day, I was willing to do anything, take any job, I didn't care. Nothing mattered anymore. I had reached the precipice and thrown myself off. A dream ended that day. A dream that had been my life and soul and blood since I first picked up a guitar. Dissolved without notice. It was a moment of supreme loneliness and doubt. A moment of resignation to the expectation that nothing would ever be as exciting or as cool ever again.

Heading into town, walking down the quiet tree-lined street that we had chosen as the best place to start a family, thousands of moments flashed past in my memory.

Nine years previous, at my first session as a producer, I was standing with my hand on the control room glass, looking out into the studio wondering if I had what it would take to succeed in this business. Assembling all the musicians I could for a group photo to put in our advertising, making that first real money sale at Quaker Oats, the sensation I had every time we'd crank the final mix through the main speakers. The feeling that stuff was really rockin' and everyone was groovin'.

And...recently, the voices on the other end of the phone telling me that there were no projects anymore.

It wasn't a sudden hit, like an oncoming car crossing into my lane. It was like climate change, on a personal level. Barely noticed at first, ignored in denial and the too-busy distractions of one day after the next, until suddenly it just got too hot and everything got fried. The forces that came together at that moment were not of my own doing. But that didn't matter. There was no work. Period.

So what then? Give up? Try to adapt, adjust? Compromise vision and abandon the ideas that are so vitally needed? That's reactive thinking. It looks for solutions within the limitations of external parameters controlled by external forces.

Strength: the ability to respond quickly and decisively, the ability to make major decisions based on a deep understanding of our vision combined with the flexibility of a broad multifaceted perspective. The value of an expansive vision is its ability to be adaptable and flexible. When vision is broad and all encompassing, there is a pro-active solution waiting to be discovered.

Strength is the power of identity moving in the vast expanse of vision, ignited by the spontaneity and inventiveness of inspiration and founded on the rigor and skill of voice and process. Resilience is not simply the willpower to succeed against adversity. Resilience is the mastery of a creativity that applies knowledge and skill to solving problems of adverse impact with the same inspired energy and confidence that discovers and implements world changing ideas.

Strength is the application of creative process to change the effect of external forces upon our activity; to seize command of our own circumstances and put them back under our own control.

When external forces have grabbed the wheel and thrown everything off course, the last thing we should do is jump overboard. The solution is to dig deep into the resourcefulness and imagination of creative inspiration and wrench the wheel back – find a way to regain control.

It wasn't pity or remorse or discouragement that threw me into the crevice, it was just plain practical need and a resolve that I was willing to do whatever was necessary for my family to live decently. Like swallowing bitter medicine, I just wanted it to happen as quickly as possible. I walked into the first store I saw and asked if they needed any help. They did. And so began the next year and a half of my working life – spent wearing a hideously bright orange vest with someone else's name on the pocket.

There is a place in the desert, about 40 miles northeast of Amman, Jordan that is where this story ends. It is east of the Jordan River on the banks of the river Zarqa where it flows through a deep and broad valley surrounded by 3,000 – 5,000 foot mountains. Today the geography of this area looks very much like that of California or central Italy. There are terraced fields and golden brown hills.

On modern maps, this place is without a name. However, three thousand years ago, its name was highly honored. It is here, in this place, on the bank of the River Jabbok as it was called in those days, the story says, "Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day."

In the morning, Jacob demanded some answers. And in honor of his fortitude, his name was changed to Israel. And he called this place, a small low area among the trees not far from the river's edge, by the ancient Hebrew name, Penuel, the "face of God." "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." He realized that God would not let his brother Esau kill him.

Each day as I walked to the store, I struggled with questions rolling around inside my head: what went wrong, what should I have done, was I really that incompetent? I lived and breathed an unending tape loop of the same mindless tasks and the same internal conflicts.

Day after day and then month after month, there were no answers, only unrelenting questions.

This place, among the screws and nails and bolts of the "fasteners" aisle was my

place where I wrestled with a man until the breaking of the day. In my case, as it may have been in Jacob's, as well, the man I wrestled with was myself. However, for me it took many long days before the man gave in and said, "let me go, for the day breaks."

But eventually the confusion and the hurt and the pain and the sorrow and the frustration did break. And while some might not believe that I saw God, I do know that I saw the real path open before me.

In a very real sense, this was my place of Penuel. My daily struggle with myself to try to really understand what I was supposed to be doing and why I should be doing it.

In my case, the economy kicked me out on to the street where I started a long progression of events that taught me to overcome the fears of doing my own work and to stand on my own as an independent artist. It took a long slow financial melt-down to induce a re-evaluation of how I envisioned achieving my ideas. It was the equivalent of waiting for the dust to clear and then picking up the pieces and starting again. It wasn't easy, but it was successful. And the result was clearly progressive.

The paradigm of commercial music never really served my vision of creating innovative, original music. I began to explore the possibility that there were processes that I could use to accomplish what I really wanted to do all along. I began to see how the facets of my identity – my artistic vision and my values, my devotion to friends and family, my responsibilities – could come together in a single identity instead of remaining compartmentalized in separate spheres of un-connectedness. Once the pieces started to look like they could fit together, I found a stronger conviction in my vision, a commitment to find a way to make it all work – together.

Sometimes external forces cause us to rebuild, start over, or maybe even walk away for a time – reevaluate our vision and do a better job of understanding our own identity.

When the commerce in commercial music dried up, there just wasn't any reason to do other peoples' stuff, anymore. Eventually, I learned how to spend my time chasing my own inspiration.

I grew to understand that my heart had always been there all along, anyway. It's what I should have been doing from the beginning.

Yes, at the moment when I walked into that hardware store and asked for a job, I thought I had given up. But strength, and an unrelenting vision didn't stop. I played gigs in town, my co-workers in the store thought it was cool that I was a musician. Over a period of a year and half, a new sense of direction came together. In four years time, my opera would premiere in Chicago and a year after that I would receive the NEA grant.

Looking back, even the darkest days weren't that bad. Over-all, the ride has been worth the fare.

Just don't call me Ace.

What I learned from Trane

Freedom demands bravery.



Coltrane said that when he played with Monk, sometimes “you’d suddenly feel as if you’d stepped into an empty elevator shaft.” Pianist Theolonius Monk was one of the greatest composers in jazz and at the same time he was the complete definition of eccentricity and unpredictability. Without warning, he would stand up and do a little shuffle circle-dance in the middle of a tune if he felt like it. Even his band members had no idea what was going to happen next.

But to mistake him for anything other than brilliant would be a mistake.

The music that Coltrane and Monk made together at the Five-Spot in New York is the stuff of myth and legend. Scraps of recordings exist, all made on extremely poor quality, amateur recording machines. There is nothing more that remains.

Then, in 2005, a set of ten-inch tapes from a Voice of America broadcast recording were discovered in the Library of Congress. Cryptically labeled, they’d been buried in obscurity for nearly fifty years. One, labeled simply “T. Monk,” contained a broadcast recording of a benefit the quartet played in Carnegie Hall on Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, November 29, 1957.

It was released recently and hearing that performance, which the VOA never actually broadcast, gives me a new measure of intensity and a new calibration for my own sense of what is possible in live performance. When they played together, it was a blending of forces that resulted in something that completely transcended the individual identities of the musicians involved. It is a recording that completely illustrates the concept of ensemble and the power of what open hearted group collaboration can achieve.

And it makes me think again of that night so long ago, of hearing Bartók’s Concerto for Orchestra for the first time. Why does this stuff so completely blow me away?

A powerful expression of vision, an intensity of identity.

Originality.

These works are statements of extremely powerful identity. The vision, the voice, the purpose, and the power all emanate directly from one source – unique, individual, identity. And this highly focused significance results in ideas expressed in ways that are beyond imitation, beyond equal.

There is no substitute for the music of Coltrane, Monk, Mozart, or Bartók. The power of originality is the result of an intense focus on identity at every level of the work. Upon this journey, where there are no roads and every step takes us farther and farther

into the unknown, the only guide we have is the strength of our own individual identity. This is the beacon, the compass, and the touchstone, the line on which all else is drawn.

In a world of social media, it's tempting to think of creativity as a numbers game. How many followers, how many downloads? Last week we played a concert that was standing room only. I asked Aaron, the owner of the venue, why he thought we had such a great turnout. He just shrugged and said "It's impossible to know." After decades of concerts with audiences that have ranged from my wife and daughter to a thousand people or more, the validity of the work isn't measured by numbers of tickets, followers, or downloads.

Numbers are valuable for measuring objective attributes. It is important to connect with an audience, and it is important to know how big the audience is, who they are, where they come from, and why they will come back again. Numbers and external measurements have a purpose in helping us gauge the impact a work is having, or how well the work is accomplishing its purpose. For the most part, numbers measure the depth and breadth of our community. Use numbers as a tool to help the work connect.

But don't use numbers to measure integrity or vision. Numbers don't tell us if we should give up or hang in, they don't tell us if we are brilliant or not, they don't tell us if our ideas have originality.

It's about freedom, simple as that. Creative freedom is a commanding ability to do work that expresses integrity and strength, that is all-embracing and relevant, that has permanence, significance, timelessness, that reaches across all borders, touches the world, changes it.

Freedom is majesty and excellence. It is the ability to conceive of ideas, to shape a vision, and to execute work that fulfills inspiration with power and grace, integrity and intensity.

Freedom is also the ability to be unwavering in resolve, to stand up to the discouragement that tries to turn us aside. It is an undeterred conviction that doing the work is important, valuable, and significant.

But where does the value come from? Freedom, based upon our own internal cognition that validity is inherent in the work and its purpose. The worthiness of the work is not something someone else can give us through a review, a blog post, or comments in social media. The response and recognition of others is just way to far out of our control to have any usefulness.

Numbers are weak. If we rely on numbers to get us up in the morning, to give us a sense of purpose, or to make us feel like our work is valuable, what happens if the numbers go away? If the only basis of our commitment and determination – our freedom – is external recognition, there's nothing really there to hold us up when the numbers are bad or the reviewer just doesn't get it. External forces are exactly that – external. There are way too many variables for the numbers to have much value. Numbers can not define excellence, numbers can not measure creativity.

Freedom, integrity, validity, value – none of this is a numbers game. The kind of lasting strength that keeps us working over decades and decades is based on something far stronger than the external forces that change from day to day.

Freedom is a far-reaching perspective, a relentless determination, and an unwavering commitment to our own vision.

By the time I had made the commitment to go down this crazy road, I was fully

convinced there was nothing else that I would rather do – even nothing else I could do. I already had the “opportunity” to work a large number of day jobs along the way. At one point, I worked in a boiler room of a car insurance agency. I spent a year of my life sitting at a desk for eight hours every evening in a filthy, dark, cubicle. For hour after hour, I made thousands of phone calls to delinquent car insurance customers for the sole purpose of talking them into sending the company a check. Unbelievable.

All those entirely lame jobs brought me to the realization that there were a whole lot of things that I just didn’t want to do for the rest of my life. So if doing creative work meant enduring a poke with a sharp stick on occasion, it just seemed a whole lot better than throwing bags of concrete or making round wire into flat wire for thirty years.

It probably was a good thing in my case, anyway. It gave me the conviction to keep going, the conviction that there was absolutely no reason to turn back or give up. I never wanted to go back to any of that ever again. And it made me realize that I’d better be really good at my work if I didn’t want to end up back at any of those places again. It motivated me to work really hard.

The first plateau was the point where the work was at least as strong as most stuff that was being done at the time. My conviction was based on the content of the work, the structures and materials.

The next plateau was when I realized that there was more – I learned about purpose from the opera, about voice from live performances with awesome collaborators, about venue from excellent performances presented in places no one would be caught dead in, about process and technique from practice, research, and study. It took some time. I spent many years learning how the content, materials, and details can be there but if there’s no communication happening, the most perfectly beautiful constructions aren’t going to mean anything.

Then, somewhere along the way it all melded together.

Integrity. It’s the litmus test of freedom. It comes from a resolute, unyielding conviction that we’re betting our life on this work. That there’s no “Plan B,” no exit strategy, no fall back position, no teaching certificate in case the gigs don’t materialize. It’s unequivocally clear that we’re here, living on the edge, alone and immovable – with the firmest of resolve, undeterred and entirely committed to doing this work, no matter what.

It’s about putting all the pieces together. It’s the unification of our uniquely powerful identity, vision, and purpose into a statement that is irrevocably rooted in a total commitment.

Integrity is fortified by our passion and strength, which comes from knowing there is only one way to go, that moving forward down this single path is the only option we’re willing to accept. There is simply no other way.

Freedom never blinks, knowing that the power to persevere is woven into the fabric of identity itself. It is the conviction of a vision that looks only forward, into the vast distance, beyond the edge. It is a bravery of determined resolve, a strength of purpose and intent, that is unwilling to accept anything but the work’s full value and potential.

And it is the sure resolve of a creativity bold enough to reach out and change us, renew us.

Freedom. That’s the radical part.

Of meaning and significance

Details are the awesomeness.



My opera, *The Soul of the Rock*, was once performed at a college outside Chicago. A couple of days later the dean called me. She wanted to talk. When I arrived at her office she was clearly very angry. Actually, she was livid and she was barely keeping a lid on it.

“Why did the woman have sequins on her shoes!” she demanded.

Not a single pleasantry about “nice performance, thank you very much.” Or even, “nice day, thank you for coming in.” Immediately, she jumped into this thing about the shoes. She wanted to know what the sequins meant. I couldn’t figure it out. After experiencing a 90-minute work on the struggles and ultimate triumphs of some of the 20th century’s most profound thinkers, all she wanted to talk about was the shoes?

The production had been done completely on the cheap. We didn’t have a budget for costumes. Everyone wore clothing they had. In that version of the production, the soprano served as a narrator who helped to tell the story but never held any character or role. She wore a simple black dress suitable for a concert performance to indicate that she was not part of the scene, not a character in the story. She wore the only black dress she owned. And her shoes were the only black ones she had. They happened to have a few sequins around the toes.

Although entirely dumfounded, I explained in all seriousness that those were the only black heels that the singer owned and that we didn’t have a budget to buy costumes. The sequins meant nothing. End of conversation; thank you for coming in. I was out of her office in about one minute. It was one of those weird space-age moments for which academia is justly famous.

I’m not making any of this up. This was for real, I swear. But it taught me an important lesson: Everything means something. Even stuff that shouldn’t. Even stuff that you haven’t ever thought about and even stuff that is completely insignificant, unrelated, or completely incidental. Even stuff that you ought to be able to expect a everyone will realize doesn’t matter. Someone’s going to notice it.

Ok, I’ll admit it. This does get way complicated: meaning, signification. I don’t know anything that is so important and at the same time, so ambiguous. How can something be so intangible and hard to get a handle on and yet have such a direct connection to the core of the work’s purpose? It’s deep and nuanced. Completely inescapable. And just plain intrinsically vital. And yet so absolutely impossible to define.

What role does meaning have in the conceptualization and fulfillment of great works? Is meaning important at all? Does everything have to mean something?

Stuff means something whether we want it to or not. There's always a context, a point of reference, a level of significance that's deeper or in a different dimension. Great work happens on a number of intellectual and emotional levels – simultaneously. Like language, it's the inherent consequence of highly refined and developed expression. Large gestures communicate the general idea, but the nuances of an idea are communicated through the details. It is through millions of tiny elements working together that a good idea becomes incredibly amazing.

Great work transcends its practical purpose. It becomes more than simply a tool to do something. It is a whole story, a whole universe of concepts and nuances that is fundamentally unique and without equal.

When you hear a Mozart symphony, what does it mean? Well, it means what it says. And what it says is a Mozart symphony. To the extent that if you want to hear a Mozart symphony, nothing else will do. There is no substitute for a Mozart. The fact is, Mozart does his particular thing better than anyone else ever could. Isn't that the kind of connection we all want our work to command?

Signifying work by its function is Dollar Store thinking. A contextual perception is a completely different kind of perspective.

Symbolism or metaphor? References or associations? Work that connects on these levels carries a deep, complex, highly developed meaning that goes far beyond function. Any great product, any great work is loaded with reference, history, cultural associations, artifacts of the real world. The meaning is so complex and highly nuanced that the work's practical function is pretty much secondary to our attention to the work's meaning.

What does an iPod mean, anyway? It means a lot more than simply a music player. It's just cool. That's really what makes it desirable. And it makes me cool because I'm plugged into one. In fact, when I'm wearing those earbuds, I can actually dance like those people in the commercials. Right.

It's a scene, man. The references target the meaning. And the meaning targets the users. The references focus the work by directing the meaning into a world, an environment, where the associations, the symbols, and the metaphors are shared knowledge. The references propel the work into the heart of a scene and put it in the focal point.

Instead of trying to forge it's own identity in the isolation of a referential vacuum, works that draw upon powerful and effective references and associations hit the street with built-in connections, hard-wired identity, and an immediate credibility that the users and the audience readily perceive. The meaning is happening. It's kicking. And the more highly developed and nuanced the better. This is what it's all about: Transcendent meaning.

Great work inherently involves multiple levels of signification. The deeper and more interconnected the references and associations, the more powerful and direct the communication. There's a hard drive worth of intangibles hanging in the background and we feel them, sense them, know they're there. And we plug into it all.

A thorough consideration of the work's sphere of meaning – its tangible and intangible connections – builds a strong foundation upon which to establish the

expressive elements of the work. Content, frame, voice, and even the structure and process draw upon externals that have nothing to do with the basic functionality of the work. Meaning is integral to the impact and immediacy of any idea or work. Without signification, works are without substance and identity. Does a Calder mean anything beyond the shape and the colors? It does to me.

In great work, meaning is so extensive, so developed that there's a whole narrative embedded within it. And it commands our attention.

It comes down to this: credibility. That's what really matters, isn't it? It matters that what we're saying has validity, has street cred. It matters that our work commands respect and fulfills the expectations it provokes. It matters that the references, the associations, the significations resonate within the work's context of the genre and scene.

Significance and authenticity are only credible if they are deeply rooted in our identity and vision. Honesty speaks louder than any elaborate production technique. True sincerity is the only way to really touch people with our ideas.

It's a balancing point between cultural references and sincere authenticity and originality. When that point is achieved, the result is real communication, the deeply nuanced subtleties of interaction mark a statement as either in or out. To a user or audience that is hip to what is being said, this is the most direct and intense level of communication possible.

We all know about branding, you can't grow up in a so-called first world economy without being touched by that magic wand. Branding comes down to the fact that meaning is wrapped up in a whole series of external references and associations that become an identifiable package.

Signification is at the very center of why a work exists. Even work that is intentionally without specific meaning has content that references implications from the user or viewer. Whether specific meaning is intended or not, some concept of meaning will be perceived. It is this perception of meaning that will guide the work's trajectory, place it within or without the context of its community and cause the work to remain compelling and arresting.

The signification, the meaning, connects the work to a scene and the people in it. The references and associations become a hook, the connective tissue through which each community member attaches the work to the core of their own individual identity.

How closely the signs and the references align with the expectations and common vocabulary of the collective users or audience, the more deeply embedded the work will be in a particular culture, context, or community.

But if the authenticity isn't there, or there is nothing going on at the foundational level in terms of signification and reference that matches the community's sense of validity, the work's just not going to happen no matter how developed the frame, materials, or content.

Eye candy? Ear candy? Sometimes. But really most of the time we want the whole meal. We want something substantial. Glittery, glossy stuff really isn't going to matter if the signification isn't gripping. We want something that's going to really dig in and hit us hard and deep.

Signification and meaning are rooted in the underlying purpose, the objectives, and the ambitions that are the essence of the work. The signification of a work is its primary reason to be, its primary credibility. The meaning is what endures. The meaning is what

we need.

The content, the materials, the language, the frame, the venue, the vision – that stuff's essential. If it's original and intense? That's always cool. But when the meaning, the signification is really connecting and the work is moving people, giving them the impetus to get up and actually shake it, well, that's even cooler.

I think that's it. Great works certainly don't mean nothing. Whether we want to admit it, or not. Whether it's intended, or not. I am convinced that the substance and foundation of great work is an extensive collage of meanings – layer upon layer of stuff. Highly complex. Like the Mozart or the iPod. The references are heavy, detailed, nuanced, and targeted.

Great work transcends practical application. It becomes much more than simply a tool to do a job. It's a whole story. We get wrapped up in the characters, the atmosphere, the feel, the vibe. The narrative draws us in, gives us hooks to grab on to, makes us feel like we're a part of it all.

Connections. We want to get sucked in. So give me the backstory. Fill me in with all the details, all the interesting little fragments that make me want to believe. That make me feel really connected. Give me all of it. Make it good, make it intense, make it complex and deep and interconnected. Push my buttons, touch my nerve endings. Convince me that I'm cool; that I'm who I really want to be. Assure me that I'm "in," I'm part of the scene. I'm a mover, a player, Feed my delusional sense and I'm with you, all the way. I'm your best friend for life. I'm your fan. I'll be back next week.

I want more. I want a lot more of this.

Gravity works, drop this

Big is good, power is better.



Ideas. How can you tell if they're any good? If they're worth the time and effort? In the clear cold light of reality, this is a huge factor.

"Fail fast" they say in the valley. Find a way to test an idea quickly. If it's not happening, move on.

But there's more to it than that. Does it help others? Does it improve mankind? Does it save lives? Does it lift people up? Does it employ people? Does it have longevity? Does it meet a need? Measuring the viability of a project based on values such as these is cool from an absolute perspective. But what value does it have for me as an artist or producer? Is this something that I'm excited to do? Do I really want to do this? Do I really, really, really want to do this?

It's very likely that the project will take a lot longer to complete than expected and I may be working on this idea for a way long time. When I decided to write *The Soul of the Rock* I had no notion I would be living with it for ten years. Enthusiasm, excitement, and the thrill of the concept are part of the fuel that keeps the project going.

Does it increase my skills or knowledge or ability? Does it improve my living conditions? Does it raise my image or place in the community? Does it give me a hook, a handle that identifies me? Does it push me forward? Does it build upon my strengths?

Do I have the necessary skills and abilities to accomplish the project at an acceptable level of production quality? It may not have to be at pro-caliber, broadcast quality but it has to be at a standard that is high enough to successfully communicate the idea without confusion.

Will it reach the quality standard that I've set for my work? Will I be satisfied, and maybe even proud, to be associated with it?

Do I have the resources necessary to actually complete the thing? It's really rough to work for a year or more on something and realize it will never see the light of day. Certainly things get learned along the way and usually even if the project doesn't get completed the participants get some value out of it. But when judging between potential projects, the prospect of completion is a huge factor.

And the necessary resources can be more than just money. Time, your own skills and the skills of the team members, the commitment of individuals and their willingness and ability to make personal sacrifices for the project all impact the quality and completion.

Often the availability of outside resources is vital. Doing commercial music is relatively easy in a place like Chicago. There is a large pool of fantastically talented singers and musicians to rely on. The stuff is going to sound good. The potential contribution of others to the outcome of the project is often a major factor in the production's quality.

If I choose to do this project, with whom will I be working? Can I trust them? Will they support it; will they support me? Will they buy-in? Are they inspired and inspiring individuals? Given a choice, I want to avoid projects that come with a Volkswagen full of circus clowns.

Poundage. Weight. That gravity thing: gravitas, depth, richness of textures and layers, complexity. Importance. Extraordinary and uncommon materials, high quality execution. Impact; the awareness that something extremely unique is going on. Something heavy. Webern's Six Pieces for Orchestra is heavy. Intense. Profound. And all six movements weigh in at, what, not much more than ten minutes total. Layers, complexity, mass, duration, exotic materials, all that and more can add up to something extraordinary. A heavier pile of stuff than when you started.

It's about relationships. The relationships between soft and loud, sharp and smooth, simple and complex, delicate and heavy, dark and light. The contrast and comparison between points of reference define the scale, the impact. Weight is relative.

Purpose isn't. Show me how heavy it really is.

Intensity? What can I say? It's hard not to want to crank it up. Loudness and speed usually generate a lot of energy. Loud obviously makes an impact and grabs attention, but does it hit in more ways than physical? There's more to power and energy than amplitude alone.

There's passion, for example. Deep intense personal emotion. Focused desire. The energy that impels us to become absorbed and united with all levels of the human experience, all at one time, is intensely significant. It is no coincidence that some of the best make-out albums ever were also rich in human intensity: Kind of Blue, Sketches of Spain. Miles Davis is pretty much the gold standard for passion and intensity.

Intensity is good. It comes from a rush of insight and transformation. It combines innovative thinking with immediate personal impact. When perceptions, habits, the workspace, the market, society, or the world are instantly changed, that's powerful. Intensity is energy that explodes. It hits the audience, the viewer, the user, with the kind of force that grabs the continental plates of established process and thinking and rotates them 90 degrees. It happens quickly and it is unequivocal. The telephone, the computer, the airplane, Pollack, Diaghalev. Things changed. Things became very different, very quickly.

Inspiration provokes. It hits a nerve and jolts us into some kind of response. I'm paying attention now. And I'm reacting. I'm changing. Passion, intensity, bigness, energy, immediacy. Powerful ideas leave us blown away, sent home to rethink our lives. They hit us in the gut, the head, and the heart. That's the real purpose.

The work we do is vital, essential. It means a lot more than simply a pleasant conversation, a charming date – thank you and good night. It has real, hard meaning. It helps us all move forward into a better day. It helps people have a fuller, richer

understanding of life and their place in it.

Instead of making stuff that is only interested in connecting with our own intuition or viewpoint, we need to think about how to express ideas in a direct and meaningful way to others. It's about making the work actually communicate. It's a complete 180-degree shift. An absolute reversal of the purpose. Who's the focus? What's the meaning? What am I trying to say? Who am I speaking to, anyway?

Maybe it's because I grew up watching the Vietnam War on the evening news, or maybe it's because I can remember the murders of Dr. Martin Luther King and the Kennedys, peace and harmony have always been something that I've wished for. To me, peace through equality has always been the dream, the goal, the purpose.

So when I arrived at the realization that the meaning and purpose of my opera needed to be rooted in an honest expression of my identity, that's the direction that it went – a musical essay on non-violence and world peace. It was the first project that I completed that was built from the ground up on the basis that the content expresses the vision, that identity drives the purpose, that the medium is only the messenger, and that relevance is tangible.

It's about communicating and connecting. It's about everything rooted in a clear sense of purpose.

Seeing beyond reason

Coolness and originality.



I've been sucked into a vortex – a swirling stream of people moving closer and closer towards a narrow opening between two buildings. In an almost dream-like alternative reality, I'm riding a wave forward into a narrow ally. Tiny music and clothing shops are jammed against each other on each side; suddenly, I'm lost in a kaleidoscopic daze of high-pitched J-Pop harmonies.

We're pressed together like we've rushed the stage at the Garden; it is all at once visual, aural, and physical overload. Colors, shapes, fabrics, bodies. It's hard not to notice that every one else looks amazingly cool.

There's a current, a buzz that fills the air. All around me, there's a charge that is intensely electrifying. And at the same time, it's intimate and personal. I certainly don't look that cool, I'm definitely not that hip, I'm nowhere near that young, but no matter, I'm in. I'm here. I'm feeling it. It's all happening around me and I'm a part of it.

And then suddenly at the top of the hill, the lane ends, abruptly. Like a river delta, we spill out across an open plaza, disperse in our own individual directions. It's just another hot humid summer day in Tokyo.

Flashback to the 1980's, the area around Harajuku station became the coolest place in the world.

During the years of great growth and development in Tokyo, the areas surrounding the stations on the Yamanote Railroad line became clusters of culture, society, and commerce: Ginza, Shibuya, Ikebukuro. And Harajuku.

In many respects the stations on this line have come to signify not only the city's busiest and most important urban centers, but also a convenient delineation of hipness and style, a way to define identity within the intricate complexities of the city's cultural and social landscape. To say that one hangs out in Shibuya or Akihabara means two entirely different realms of identity. Entire worlds of culture and art have clustered around these stations with significantly contrasting meaning and context.

Omotosando, the ultra-high-end fashion street, leads up to Harajuku station. In the final decades of the 20th century, Omotosando provided a more contemporary, youthful alternative to the old-school fashion glitz of Ginza. Strolling the tree-lined boulevard that leads up a gentle hill is like a walk through the pages of Vogue or a real-world Internet search of contemporary international fashion. Six-figure cars pull up and women wearing Prada or Salvatore Ferragamo step out. There are people who actually live this

way.

Behind Harajuku station is the great Yoyogi Park and Meiji Shrine, a giant forest and recreational area, one of the largest parks in Tokyo. It's a beautiful, peaceful place.

For many years Omotosando and the road through Yoyogi Park were closed to traffic on Sunday afternoons. And the road, boulevard, and plaza filled with people hanging out.

Hanging out doing what? Well, that's the point.

It is hanging out – with a purpose. What makes the social centers in Tokyo so fascinating is that each of these places has become an iconic cultural expression of something cohesive and unique, the compounded identity of the people that have gravitated to that particular place, all at the same time. And when this kind of thing happens in a place like Tokyo, the multiplication factor is huge. We're not talking about a scene that draws a few rugged individualists, we're talking a crowd.

Very quickly, encouraged by the openness of traffic-free spaces, teenagers and young people started coming here to play rock music, jam, share songs, and show off their dance moves.

And have fun dressing up.

Specifically, assembling and wearing clothing that expresses one's own individuality. Against the backdrop of the multi-million-dollar fashion industry, an entirely opposite concept evolved: a fashion statement that was based on one-of-a-kind hand assembled yet highly intricate and unified outfits that were overt and exaggerated statements of personal identity. It is the exact opposite of a scene where everyone has to wear the same designer polo shirt, or button down shirt with rep tie. This is all about uniqueness and identity to the max.

The style is Cosplay, a style of street fashion that is based on a mix and match of a lot of different styles incorporating used clothing, high priced designer pieces, and even traditional Japanese kimonos. It exploits highly contrasted shapes and sizes. Use of extreme color is common – sometimes it's a brightly colored mono-chromatic outfit or one neon color in an accessory contrasts with a monochromatic grey or white outfit. There are layers upon layers of cultural references from Manga, gaming, and literature.

Unlike the frilly-cute maid café style of Akahabara, Cosplay is sharply striking with an edge; Alexander McQueen, not Disney. The distinction between the Harajuku and Akahabara scenes is very clearly the presence or absence of individuality. Maid costumes are a predictable uniform. The outfits of Harajuku are entirely individual and all over the map. And the individualism of some people's looks have given them a cult following both on the street and in cyberspace.

Now, thirty years later, the streets are no longer closed to traffic and the place to hang out now is either the plaza surrounding the station or the bridge over the railroad tracks just to the left. The narrow, typically unnamed streets in the area are now full of local designer boutiques and second-hand clothing shops. One of these, Takeshita Dori, was the narrow pedestrian lane where I was first captivated by the color, sound, and intensity of this style.

Harajuku. The style that evolved in this place has been network broadcast and blogged to every part of the world. Whether the name itself draws any recognition or not doesn't matter. What matters is that the style, the icons, the fashion, the attitudes, the vision, has had a lasting impact on music, art, fashion, theatre, and media – nearly

everything in the pop world – for at least a couple of decades.

That's huge.

It's what can happen when vision thoroughly expresses identity, when vision is free from the constraints of expectation and conventionality.

Harajuku is, I discovered, a small place. But that didn't matter. Size had nothing to do with it. The style that developed here was hugely influential because it was the result – in a very tangible and potent form – of the search for intensely personal statements of vision.

The outfits they created were hand-assembled direct expressions of each person's unique vision. Personally selected pieces and hand-made objects combined with high and low garments or accessories to form entirely individual statements of personal values and interests. It was the remix culture in fashion and just as that musical form drew upon the artifacts of multiple genres and eras, the elements of these statements in clothing reach across boundaries of time and tradition. At their very core was the uncompromising intent to express nothing but an undiluted statement of an individual sense of vision.

Each personal sense of vision, rooted in identity and expressed without compromise made each person's outfit visually striking and theatrically bold, dramatic, and sometimes emotionally gripping. The looks were, and still are, brutally beautiful and intense. And the style resonated with the entire world. Fashion changed. And it became clear that expressing individuality is highly compelling.

The message of Harajuku is that authenticity absolutely does not suck. What sucks is faking it, doing stuff for no other reason than money or fame or anything that's completely unrelated to the vision. Authenticity is always going to be cool and amazing because it's original, unique, and infused with the intensity of our true identity. That's why the street fashions of Harajuku were so compelling. That's why the designs of Alexander McQueen blow us away. That's why Rei Kawakubo "objects for the body" show us a glimpse into a completely new world.

Authentic individuality is always going to lead us far beyond expectation. Way past rationality.

It's seeing beyond reason.

I can see for miles and miles

Step outside, enjoy the view.



I'll take the window. As practical and comfortable as the aisle seats are, given a choice, I usually go for the window.

I want to see what's out there. All of it.

What do we see? What montage of images and experiences are establishing the point of reference for our identity?

What collection of impressions, snippets of conversations, pieces of art, literature, and history, views of the world fill the pages of our internal photo album?

Are we satisfied with the view? Is it colorful enough? Is it exciting enough, expansive enough? Is it wide and rich and deep enough? Is it consistent and thorough enough, or strong and powerful enough? Is it all those things? There's always more.

Get out of here. Go somewhere else – anywhere, it doesn't matter. Take a walk, take a train, take a plane, take a road trip, get on a boat, anything. Go places, go next door, it doesn't have to be exotic – Delhi or Rio or Springfield. Eat something unfamiliar, listen to something new, read, search the Web. Meet people, anyone. Have a conversation, hear a new voice, listen to new sounds and rhythms.

Crack open the seal, let something dangerous out of the box.

Hope, ideals, desires. These are serious and intense words. Words that really mean something. Not just simple words that mean other simple words. These words mean something tangible, they mean something deep. They are a part of real people, a part of real people's lives. They are the core of who we are, who we want to be and what we want to do.

These are words that people don't ignore or casually accept. Talking about these things is serious, deep, passionate stuff. Don't push my hopes and ideals around. It is a very delicate and potentially scary thing to look in the mirror or to look out of a window. Messing around at this level is stirring the roux, the very fiber of who we are.

It probably seems safer to leave this stuff alone.

Then, one day, the window shade is going to break, it's going to be impossible to ignore the view any longer. That's when these things float to the surface: images, sounds, a memory here and there.

Logic and order and reason might not jump in, but over in the corner of the frame something will start to make some sense, a few pieces of the puzzle will start to match

up.

At that moment, things become different. There's unity, relationships, interconnections that were there all along but for whatever reason just didn't seem to matter or were just a little too blurry to understand. It's one of those moments when the Tetris blocks all fall into place on their own and it kind of seems strange – in a good way. The priorities, the relationships expand.

When I first started doing stuff, I just did it. I really didn't know why. And I really didn't even know enough to care.

Doing stuff was cool. Doing stuff was exciting and doing stuff seemed like a good idea at the time.

I wanted the stuff to be strong and meaningful. I wanted to do good work. I wanted to be sure that the work I did hit a certain level of quality. I wanted people to know that I could deliver and that I had skills. I wanted to know within myself that what I was doing had some substance, some value.

But did I care if it had any real purpose or if it had any real underlying foundation in the depths of the earth? Did it ever enter my mind that the stuff had to mean something?

No. In retrospect, I didn't care about any of that. For better or worse, for whatever the outcome may have been, I will admit that things were pretty simple at first.

Cool idea. Do it. That works. Stuff gets done, cool stuff gets made. And people dig it.

Just throw the stuff out there. See if it floats. See what rises to the top. Let the market decide. That kind of attitude works. If you're willing to accept that maybe more times than not stuff is going to just sink into the muck.

Early on, that's OK. But after awhile everything gets more complicated. Time and resources start to seem more precious. Success brings more opportunities. Can't turn that down. Now, all of a sudden the inefficiency of a shotgun theory seems a liability rather than a business model.

One day, someone says something like, "Why do you always try to do stuff that's so, um, colorful/dark/loud/soft/ugly/beautiful?" And it's a friend, who really cares. Someone who's listened to way too much Mozart or whatever's on the radio. Someone who really wants to know because she really likes you but just can't understand your stuff at all.

What do you say? How do you answer?

I like it? I wanted to do it that way? Or maybe, "Um...I just didn't think of that." So you make up something. And it sounds pretty stupid or doesn't make any sense or doesn't really explain anything.

And she walks away.

Ouch.

Or worse. It's a producer, or a curator, or a potential collaborator you really admire, or a sponsor, or an investor, or an agent (as it was in my case) – someone who is really interested and has a lot of hope that your stuff could be the next big thing. But, see, in this world of reality we find ourselves in today, that person needs more than hope.

She needs a real reason. She is going to jump out of the window with you.

This agent, this producer, this whatever needs to feel like the decision to devote time, commitment, and resources in your direction has at least some logic to it. She needs to feel like it's going to be a good thing to fall through the sky with you. She needs to be

pretty sure the landing's not going to be so rough it pulls down her mortgage payments and the lease payments on the Maserati. Not to mention her kid's school bills.

Good work counts. Good work starts the conversation.

Without good work, nothing's going to happen. Without good work, no one's even going to make a pass at you. But if they do, eventually there is some talk. And what do you say? There's got to be a strong and identifiable sense of an underlying foundation to the work or there really isn't much to say. There needs to be something to hang a relationship on. A vision.

"Cool" only gets you so far.

To some extent it has to do with that crummy R word.

Responsibility.

Or maybe it's accountability.

I'm talking about when a project gets so big that it can't be accomplished on your own. It's one thing to drag yourself over every shard of broken glass on the sidewalk, but to do it to others is another story. That's asking a lot. That's asking people to give up their own set of priorities and accept yours, instead. Even if money is involved, their willingness to follow you over the edge of your idea is going to need more than a few bucks.

See, they're jumping out the window with you, too. And all these people are helping you drag the audience, the market, the users, the viewers along for the ride, too. We're all free falling.

And we're doing this because...? Because of this idea? Because of something that seemed cool one night? Because of something that seemed like a good idea?

Sorry, I need more than that.

After you've landed hard on the pavement a few times, you start to be a little shy about stepping out on the ledge again. Taking the leap starts to seem like a lot bigger decision the second or third or fourth or fifth time around.

And all these people, these talented performers, stitchers, painters, actors, dancers, craftspeople, and devoted investors honestly want to be true believers. But they need something that will convince them it's going to be ok, this time.

And then, what if it gets bumpy along the way? We want to hear the captain come on the microphone and sound like Chuck Yeager. We want to hear from someone who can see what's ahead, who can see out the front window and tell us what all this is really about. We want to hear from someone who can keep us focused so that we can ignore our own distractions and the rough ride and get back at it.

The voice on the microphone expresses a vision. A vision that will get us over the bumps. A vision that will guide the hard or impossible decisions that must be made. A vision that will keep the project moving in the direction intended, even though there's a 50 knot side wind or an unexpected new product on the market that's trying to push us off the road, or turn us into road kill.

Vision keeps us looking up. Vision keeps us looking out. Vision keeps us from getting distracted and turning the wrong corner just because there was a cute blond down that street.

Vision guides the decisions that have to be made, makes sure the hard decisions don't get ignored, sets priorities for what needs to be done first. Vision gives us the

freedom to let go of things that don't matter, that won't move the enterprise forward.

Vision motivates, it gives us all a sense that on a day-to-day basis this thing is going somewhere. And that means it's worth hanging in there, it's worth staying committed, it's worth a continued modulation of personal priorities for the good of the project. The vision overrides personal concerns or personal fears or personal doubts.

How can we keep going? How can we make the tough commitments, how can we do the hard work that needs to be done?

Great work captivates. It inspires, commands attention, seduces involvement. But when there are bills to be paid, or the work gets dirty or scary – like risking one's career, reputation, friendships, family, or living accommodations – personal commitment alone usually isn't enough.

We all want to do this. But we need some guidance, we need some confidence, we need some faith to make a big leap. We need to understand the real reason why we're all hanging here in mid-air together.

We need a deeper understanding of the creative process. We need insights and knowledge – a vision – that's going to stand the hard tests of real world experience.

Look up vision in the dictionary and it turns out to have evolved from two early origins. To see. To know.

Knowing everything means knowing a lot. More than most people can ever accomplish. More than I will ever know. I'm acquainted with some real geniuses that know everything. But I'm not one of them. The best I can hope for is to know as much as I can. To constantly strive to know more. About what?

The barrio, the community, the competition, the past, the future, the technology, the philosophies, and imaginings that drive people, the expectations of the market, and the successes and accomplishments of others.

And as difficult as it is, to know about myself.

As much as vision is about looking out and seeing more and more all the time – the details and color and light and knowledge – it is also an awful lot about looking in. It is about seeing ourselves with accuracy – our strengths and opportunities, where we fit in, what we're really doing, what we should be doing. It is an almost detached observation of ourselves as we work and function. What's good for us, what suits us? What jacket feels right and doesn't make us look too fat or too skinny? What vocabulary, what set of initiatives, what collection of references and associations work best to achieve a more full representation of who we are and what we hope to accomplish?

What should we be doing? Right now?

Look out the window, think about it. Ponder the potentials and the realities. What can each of us do – that no one else could ever do?

There's something there. Look again. That's the core, the focal point, the target of what we should be looking at. Don't get distracted, don't look away. We need to aim our vision intently on this and lock it down. Seriously know this.

It's your vision. Make it what you want it to be. Make it rich and deep.

Vision guides everything. Unavoidably, it is the core and the lifeline of how we express who we are, our individual identity. Vision encompasses our understanding of value and potential and validity and purpose. Vision is our true life and love.

Vision is our world. Vision is the spontaneous combustion that powers the engine that keeps everything going. Vision needs to be big and powerful.

It is who we are; it is a direct reflection of our identity. Don't settle; don't be satisfied with a vision that doesn't express your uniqueness. Keep pushing, keep reaching for more.

Vision moves, vision grows, vision expands. Vision is infinite. It's that simple and that complex.

Be kool, get sklz

Stuff has to really work.



Cutting tape was once a highly regarded skill.

As a music producer in the '80s it seemed like editing a track was just an every-day thing. Make a 60, make a long cut, add 10 seconds. Trim off 5 seconds here. And in the process there would be tape fragments all over the place – dangling like a beaded curtain in rows around the frame of the machine, coiled around me on the floor, rolled off to another reel to be flown in later.

I did thousand of edits. It just happened to be something I was extremely good at it. And the more I did it, the better I got. Fast and clean.

Editing today? Not scary. The audio file is packed away on the hard drive. Backed up. Safe from the slip of the blade. Mess up an edit, no problem. Just reload the file and try again.

Even though I don't edit on tape anymore, moving things around, slicing stuff up, doesn't scare me.

I've seen way too many edits turn out to be awesome to want to miss any chance to make the track better, more compelling.

Precision is imperative.

So let's start with clarity: Claritas.

A good friend of mine uses that Latin word as her password. And her emails are a model of brevity and succinctness. They are amazing mini-masterpieces.

Work clean and work with skill.

Isn't this about excellence, really?

We need to be able to make stuff that really connects. We need to be able to make stuff that really works. If great ideas are expressed and communicated through the work, the work needs to be good enough to actually accomplish the purpose. The work needs to express the voice and language of the inspiration so thoroughly, so directly, that we all get it. The work needs to be able to deliver the message, clearly and effectively.

Making stuff relies on our ability to execute the craft, to deliver a compelling representation of the inspiration. So we need to be able to do this stuff. Ourselves.

Because no matter how grand the budget no one else is ever going to get the vision as thoroughly as we get it ourselves. Especially in the beginning when no one but ourselves will have a clue. We've got to be able to edit it, mix it, direct it, and frankly

we've got to raise the money for it, ourselves.

And we need the skills to do it right, to do all that stuff like a pro.

But what if things just don't work out so well? No surprise there. It happens all the time, especially at first. When stuff just isn't good enough, it's time to figure out what's wrong. Get some help, even go practice for a few months or take a class. Hire someone that's a pro; go ahead, it's not going to hurt that much. Or buy the right gear or materials. Tools matter.

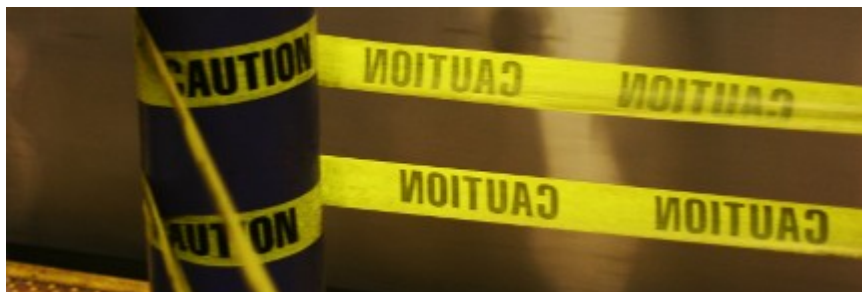
If something's lacking in the work, the answer isn't to give up. And settling for something less than great isn't the answer, either. If the project is not working, fix it. Do whatever it takes.

The point is that in the end, the stuff should be really good, maybe even brilliant. At least it needs to be excellent enough that the message comes through, clearly and directly. That we're all going to get it. That we're all going to walk away with a connection to the vision and the spark of the inspiration deeply imprinted on our own consciousness.

That's all.

Superstition

The road to great work is littered with the obstacles of our own uncertainty.



Head games bad.

The biggest speed bump on the road to doing the work – for me and a lot of people that I know – is always the mental game: those little voices that carry on all manner of conflicting and confusing conversations in the dark recesses of underlying uncertainty.

There are all kinds of ways they slowly erode enthusiasm. And ultimately even money doesn't help.

The pain of just plain getting worn down; it's far too easy for too many rewrites, too many revisions, and too much conflicting input to pile up into one big hopeless mess and take the whole thing south.

There was a media producer in Milwaukee that I really wanted to work with. He got decent projects and his company had a cool vibe. Finally, after a couple of years he asked me to do a track. On spec.

Ok. I'll do that. Maybe I shouldn't but I will if I have the time and the project seems to have enough viability. And this one did. It was a national client. So I made a really cool, innovative track incorporating extensive use of sampling which was very new and hip at the time (1989). He sends it back, with cryptic comments about how it needs more beat. So I make a couple more versions with harder, louder beats. All rejected with almost nonexistent guidance from the client.

It was a study in losing traction and driving in circles; energy was applied but there was never any acceleration. For a long time afterward, I pondered what went wrong. Maybe there was too much baggage, too much unnecessary complexity, too much infrastructure, too many undeveloped relationships, too many missed connections.

After several tries we both just gave up. Way too vague; it just drained every last drop of inspiration out of the project.

In the end, it was pretty obvious no one had a clear idea of what the client wanted. It was basically a "fishing expedition." A real world version of hide and seek: "we'll know what we want when we see it." All on spec, which is to say on someone else's money.

Holy guacamole. Let me out of that one.

But it happens all the time. I've watched myself and my students flailing around, trying all kinds of things and then erasing or deleting it. Students would bring me compositions that were promising but incomplete. Then next week, they would show me something completely different, completely unrelated to the work of the past week.

Where did last week's good idea go?

"Oh, I don't know, I just didn't like it."

Wow, really? But the fact is, it happens. It happens a lot in the early stages of a project – there's no real vision there.

Yes, we need to make a beat. But do we know what we want? No. So how will we recognize it when we hear it? Obviously, we won't because there is nothing to measure the track against other than a subjective sense that it's either cool or not. We're simply casting about looking for something we like. We're fishing for ideas instead of starting with a vision.

Subjectivity anyone? Sorry, but I just don't have time for it.

The other thing that's happening is that judgments made with no conscious awareness of the actual purpose of the track make it completely impossible to arrive at a decision with any level of conviction. There's nothing to base a rational evaluation upon and we know it and it freaks us out. It pushes us into irrationality and we just pass on every single idea that comes our way, over and over again. We get into a mode of adamantly avoiding something that might end up being lame in the future – by nixing everything. And we end up with nothing.

It's a waste of time. And it's worse than that because good ideas get stomped on. Some great ideas just never see the light of day.

What finally broke this habit for me was hindsight.

And the benefit of being able to look back on projects from the distance of several years. Sorting through old computer files, backing stuff up, I started to get curious about the stuff I'd thrown away – the stuff in the folders labeled "Useless."

Sobering. The first time I realized I'd driven a project into the ground with my flailing ways, I was pretty shocked. I'd literally thrown away the best stuff.

What state of mind caused me to latch on to content that wasn't my best work, and allow it to ultimately make the final? Why did I shred so much really interesting stuff?

I started looking harder, started examining more of those archives. I wanted to know if I had always been that stupid or if I just messed up once.

The hard fact is, often really great stuff got nuked. Ok, the finals weren't bad. But buried in the trash bins of projects were a lot of really fresh ideas that completely flew right by me at the time.

Why? Because I wasn't paying attention.

I didn't even know how to pay attention. I was just laying down tracks, throwing stuff on the wall, churning it. No strong grasp of purpose, no awareness of my vision. Just making stuff. It's no wonder I couldn't tell the original content from the ordinary.

The biggest liability of relying on subjective, gut level methods of evaluation – deciding whether content is cool or not based solely on how it hits us in the flash of the moment – is that stuff that is ordinary, expected, common, hackneyed is going to seem the most familiar and therefore the most subjectively "cool." It's cool because we've heard it before. Sometimes quite literally. But it comes across in the moment as cool because it's just like everything else that's going on around us – it fits in, it blends, it fulfills a common expectation of coolness. And we're like, yeah, that rocks.

But it doesn't. Ultimately, it's boring. We've heard it all before. And it's not going anywhere.

Slow down a millisecond or two, hold on to a clear measure of the purpose of the

content and stay in touch with the vision of our unique identity and the habitual struggle to generate excellent content will have a foundation based on something a lot more certain than “I like it.” Or not.

Roadblocks. There are a lot of things that will try to intimidate us, try to put obstacles in front of our desire to do the work we deeply cherish.

There’s nothing that pulls down a project faster than the feeling of incompetence. That fragile little place between seeing things realistically and becoming consumed with the suspicion that one has completely “lost it” is about the most dangerous place I know. And I used to fall in there all the time.

When that happens, it’s basically all over.

Comparisons. They’re worse. They start out sounding like an attempt to rationally figure out how we can get good, get better at what we do. But they start us thinking about how amazing someone is and wanting to know how they got that good. Then it heads south. So and so is awesome; I’m not. She’s just so amazingly talented; I’m not. And it’s not very long and I’m falling through space and never hitting bottom. Didn’t my mom tell me that there’s always going to be someone richer, taller, skinnier, cooler? Yes, I know.

Completely irrational and yet, entirely destabilizing.

Digging out of that deep dark place always takes an enormous amount of effort.

It takes help. Friends and family, anyone who supports us and our work, who is willing to offer even a fragment of encouragement or assistance can begin to turn this kind of discouragement around. Feeling like there’s even one other person on this planet that values what we’re trying to accomplish is enough to turn the corner on discouragement.

If there is someone doing great work, doing something that is amazing, stuff that is admirable or inspiring – tell him, tell her. We all need that spark of human connection to help overcome the downward pull of the constant challenge to be amazing, to be way more exciting than yesterday, to do anything at all. It’s a demanding world we live in.

Let’s help; let’s give each other a push, some support and encouragement to do the work that needs to happen to change our world for the better.

Procrastination, discouragement, low self-esteem, personal conflicts. They make it hard to have the openness and transparency that is necessary to fully express inspiration.

Entry-level discouragement begins by making us think we’re not worthy to have the time, not competent enough to do good work, or just not “destined” to succeed. All this stuff is illogical and foundationless.

Insidiously stupid.

In the clear light of day it’s not hard to see beyond the generic negativity of these claims. But when the emotional climate starts to pull downward, rationality goes with it. We start to believe these suggestions as honest and accurate assessments of ourselves. We fall deeper and deeper into a funk and the reality of clearheaded reason fades.

Every job has its down side, there are always bad days and there are always dirty jobs to do. When I worked at the hardware store, the worst it got was slinging 100 pound bags for concrete off the back of a semi trailer. In the creative world, putting up with this intimidating junk is essentially the same kind of thing:

It's just a bad day. Tomorrow will be better.

Static, those places on the radio dial where nothing is happening.

Distractions, completely irrelevant stuff that pulls us away from the core of our vision.

They are all basically just interference, like radio static or noise, that encroaches on the good stuff, makes it hard to see and hear the real music, the brilliant images. It's a fog that lies like a filmy gauze over the lens that turns everything into a fuzzy shadow of aimlessness.

But at a higher elevation, our view, our vision, the saturated colors are always there – the brilliance of lighting, the purity of sounds, the depth of focus hasn't changed.

Apply a filter, a mental algorithm to decode and discard the noise from all the distractions and interference. Plug in and engage an internal noise reduction software – a process that's already built in to vision – to cut through the clutter – the shrapnel and landmines in the road – and keep focused on the good stuff, focused on moving forward. Use the filter of vision to make all those mental potholes and speed bumps vanish in the peripheral blur of real acceleration.

Personal demons? There's a million or more. They're all just stupid.

The more we accept the uniqueness of identity, the more all this negativity becomes simply irrelevant. Strong identity renders external pressures mute. So don't get pulled down. Don't even go there.

“Shut up ‘n play yer guitar.”

Archeology and the ancient art of continuity

The part about finding direction.



An allegory: There's a locked room somewhere in my memory that holds the remains, the lingering perceptions of all the work I've done, or tried to do.

It looks like four hastily built walls of leftover lumber scavenged from building sites in the neighborhood. When I was a kid, there were blocks of vacant land around my family's home. I grew up on the edge of the suburbs at a time when they were still being built. A few houses were scattered around the grid – a combination of paved roads and dirt tracks through open fields. And nearly everything else was a vacant lot waiting to become someone's home. During those childhood years, houses were built around us. And the cast-off lumber became the raw materials for clubhouses and tree forts built in the still vacant land just over the edge of the line of construction.

That's what my room looks like. It's anything but square. It looks like it was built by a kid because it was. I started young. So that's it. That's the place where all my stuff collects.

Consider this: our identity starts out as four blank walls, staring us in the face. A metaphor, an imaginary construction, something to ponder or something to avoid. Pristine, like a gallery space waiting for us to put our mark upon it.

Start doing stuff, start plastering this inner space with work. Pretty soon it's going to start to look like one of those places on the street where everyone nails up their posters, layer upon layer. An archeological dig through the artifacts of lost cultures and civilizations.

For so many years, I was just happy to get a gig. There was the immediacy of bills to pay and groceries to buy, and the commercial gigs managed to do it. Pretty simple.

Then months and years went by and life got more and more complicated, as it seems to do. It was becoming harder and harder to do the work and make ends meet. The economy, competition, all kinds of stuff. I was standing at the crossroads.

Back in chapter one, when I was contemplating that I just might have crossed the line and it was time to quit, a miracle of sorts happened. As a result of the times and circumstances, the monetary value of the work had evaporated away. And in its place came the realization that there must be more to this music thing than simply paying the rent. Although I didn't know it at the time, I had taken out my key, unlocked my room, and took a clear, cold, serious look through the archeology. There was a lot of stuff in there, that's for sure, and I knew I really loved making music, but hardly any of the work

seemed significant enough to give me a reason to keep going. Ouch.

So for me this worked kind of in reverse. When I finally realized I wasn't at all thrilled with all those clown stickers taking over large sections of my walls it made me realize I should start thinking harder about why I was doing this stuff in the first place. Man, that really kicked me in the butt. It came down to this: quit or get to work and do stuff you feel supremely passionate about. Do something important enough that the world would be missing something without it.

That's when I sat down and began to figure out how to write the opera. And the first step was to ponder what content, what storyline or theme would give the work real substance. What would drive this project with the power, passion, and intensity that I truly felt towards my work? What would give it enough serious artistic substance to keep me going?

The opera was, in every way beginning of my understanding of what it means to be an artist. It was the first time I let my real sense of purpose come through in my art. It was this high level of vision that kept me working night after night and year after year. It is what gave me the conviction to spend ten years revising and refining until it was as strong as I could make it.

The opera changed my life, it changed my work, and it showed me how I could think and work as an artist. It showed me that respect and value of the work grew from the intensity of my conviction and that I could remain committed to accomplishing it no matter what. That's what keeps me going.

So here's a package of stickers to get you started. Slap them around. Go find some more or make some for yourself, scrawl big black outlines around the cool and amazing stuff, use your fingers, get messy. If some paint ends up on the floor, it doesn't matter. The floor doesn't count.

Just find some time once in a while to check it all out. Take it all in – the full panorama. I'm talking about sitting down and giving your work some careful, thoughtful consideration. Ponder it, imagine the possibilities. Sift through the archeology.

This inner wall thing is about gaining the assurance that this stuff we're doing is important, to be convinced that this work absolutely needs to be done. It's a way to recognize the power of our work to change us and raise us all up. It is, actually, like archeology, a record of what has happened and clues to what it all means.

On your own walls, what do you see? How's it going? No matter how many broken fragments are lying on the floor or how much paint has faded away, does your work have value, meaning, and the strength of an underlying vision? Can you see the collective achievement of experience, cool stuff happening again and again?

Look again, deeper. What do you feel? Is there intensity, energy, passion? Does the work reach out and grab us, compel us to look or listen? Is there a growing sense of unity of voice and purpose? Take notes, be determined, let these walls inspire whatever comes next.

It comes down to this: the search for continuity, the ability to hang in there, accomplish work that really says something, and means something, stuff that really works, again and again.

The roots of experience, the passion and intensity of the artist within.

Logical, maybe

Inspiration is always a possibility.



I look down, hold it. A gold watch, with my father's name engraved on the back. Worn, scraped, covered in thousands of tiny hairline scratches from the accidental abrasions of working and moving through a complicated world.

I'm holding it now, putting it over my wrist.

I snap the clasp closed. It fits me now, after a jeweler added a couple of extra links to the band.

I was standing in the shop, waiting. The jeweler told me he couldn't resize it. It was too old. Replacement links were no longer available. So I just stood there. Wondering what to do. Pondering the possibility of never being able to wear the watch my Dad left me.

A man walked in. "Can you resize my watch band, it's too big?" he asked the jeweler.

"Ok, let me see it," he said, reaching out for the watch.

Out of the corner of my eye, I was looking, too. It was the same watch as mine, with the same band.

"I need you to remove two links in the band for me," the man said.

"Give me a couple of minutes," the jeweler said as he disappeared behind his worktable.

Inspiration is founded on the backstories, the imperfections, the marks left by real life. The explanation of things indecipherable but definitely real and tangible.

It's not the watch that really inspires, it's the individuality expressed in a seemingly random patina of scuffs and abrasions, the subtle remnants of countless moments of interaction with everyday experience. The ordinary experience of a real person living a real existence full of real complications and hopes and joys carried forward across time and space – expressed in a form that is tangible and knowable.

It's those scrapes and dents of real experience that establish the sensation of intensity I feel whenever I put it on. They are the hard-wired connection to an experience outside of my own that communicates over time and distance. In an abstract way, he's with me again, still telling me stories of his workday, his inventions, his first plane ride in the Navy so long ago.

It's deep and powerful.

And it's even more than that. It's profound and deeply personal. The expressions of identity that leak out and rise to the surface are the source of expanded layers of vision, the place where inspiration happens.

Inspiration is rooted in the imperfections and unexplained experiences of living and being.

Like my father's watch, it is the marks of real experience that provide the power of individual insight and expression that propels our inspiration.

Inspiration expands.

Nurture inspiration, feed it from its source, from its roots in identity and vision, from the absolute realities of everyday experiences big and small, lasting and soon forgotten. Inspiration is an assemblage, a soft sculpture of ever expanding and morphing shapes and colors that draws us into the zone where flashes of new insight happen.

Stuff is bouncing off the walls, all around us, all the time.

Reach out, grab those moments of sheer individuality, those shards of vision and identity. Capture them, again and again. The richness of inspiration is drawn upon our own real experience filtered through the lens of our own vision. Call it personality, character, or style, inspiration is the open sharing of who we are and what we value.

Inspiration that grows from our own identity and vision is inherently natural, uncontrived, active, and lively. Whatever we do to expand our vision, enhance our view of the world and our place in it, refines and develops our inspiration. Inspiration is about expressing our individuality more clearly, more powerfully, more completely. The more willing we are to open our hearts, express our identity, and share our vision, the more powerful and intense will be our levels of inspiration.

When vision is expansive and inclusive, our inspiration will yield ideas that have the power to reach out to all of us and change us.

Inspiration is almost magical. But it's not. We are inspired by the loose ends, the unfinished sentences, the electricity in the air when two people are talking and laughing and looking into each other's eyes.

Starting and ending.

Arriving and leaving.

Inspiration is the union of rationality and the unknowable. It is about beginning in one place that is entirely logical and reasonable, and ending someplace entirely different – a destination that is completely unexpected and unpredictable. How does this happen, how do we get so far into the unknown?

It's about preserving the instantaneous:

It was the late 90's. I was doing a lot of deep house and IDM. Technology was moving fast in those days and it was an exciting time. I went exploring. I found the inspiration to produce an album – or maybe the inspiration found me.

Leaving Venice.

Some affairs leave a trace that just doesn't ever go away. At some moment long after the kiss that turns out to be the last one, there is a moment when it has clearly ended. But the long fade never completely finishes. The audio level never drops to real digital zeros. There is a thinly evaporating reverb tail that envelops everything from that

moment forward.

I am standing in a train station. It is Paris. It is New York. It is Chicago. It is Venice and I am waiting to leave. Why? Because I have to. The last touch, the last look into her eyes, the last time I heard her voice on the other end of the phone, the last time I felt the brush of her hair and the smell of her skin all have some kind of unreasoned power to linger, to remain suspended in Matrix-like bullet time. I'm standing on the platform spinning thoughts around and trying to examine the details from all perspectives at once. Trying very hard to impress those moments into some kind of silicon database that will never be erased or lost.

A journey begins and ends. Each day is a step further along the path. The doors open and another platform appears. Trains enter and passengers exit. Sometimes I board the train, sometimes I let it go. Another will follow shortly. Maybe the destination is wrong, somehow. But how do I know this?

There's a large dose of mystery in all of it – call it inspiration: A picture, a feeling or an atmosphere. I want to be transported, I want to be a passenger sometimes. I want to step off the platform into the thin air of speed and go someplace – different. A new place that moves me, makes me think, reconsider, revise, reboot. I want to be up-ended, turned inside out, rearranged. I want to read Kanji, or at least think I can. I want to find out that it's different inside someone else's head and I want to know more about that. I want insight, I want a vision. I'm in love and I don't know why. Isn't that the best kind of love? The most intense? There isn't any reasoning any more, there's just being, and if I'm totally honest, there's a lot of fantasizing about it. There's reality, and then there's everything else. It's the everything-else that's fascinating.

It's as simple as that. Leaving Venice is leaving no one, no place, and it's leaving a special place and a special person. You decide. It's a complete fiction and it's the only reality.

How do you address the sensual? If significant work is about the exploration of the human condition and our collective relationships in this briar patch, at some point the camera is going inside places that won't end up suitable for younger viewers. What matters is that there is this element of irrationality, the searching inside of things that aren't logical or reasonable. And sometimes we do things just because it seems right; financial analysis isn't even a consideration. Why do I do what I do? For the most part, for better or worse it has been for no real reason at all.

Passion. It's inspiring.

Which explains *Leaving Venice*. The granular resynthesis of Kathryn Steiler's voice, the vocoder processed keyboard parts, the layers of polyrhythms. It's a dream sequence. It's a mystery novel, it's an eight millimeter, black and white hand-held indie film, it's something I can't tell you about because it's not real; it is a fantasy of suggestion and imagination.

Her voice lingers, like the memories that float through the inner cinema of my mind as I stand on the platform watching the trains gliding by. I'm not listening to them, I have a different soundtrack inside my head. It's a juxtaposition, a superimposed imagery upon reality that makes everything clearer somehow. Clarity of meaning. Rearrangement of context.

There is a border between reality – the known quantities and entities and expectancies – and the ethereal nothingness of the unexplored or unexplained. That’s where I’m headed. I’m headed across that frontier. I’m waiting for the midnight express to Moscow. I want a new kind of clarification of those things that don’t quite add up when I tap the numbers into my calculator app.

This is how it started.

Raw inspiration.

In a fleeting moment, standing on a platform somewhere. It was maybe 20 years later. And there was this flash of a moment in Venice that just flew by like a ghost train that doesn’t need to stop at mortal stations anymore. It was an enormous instant, in every extreme meaning of that oxymoron. Filled with the feelings of passion and mystery that must have been simmering on a low burner for all those years. Why then and more importantly why at all? I don’t know. But the vibe, the feeling, the atmosphere, the sensuality, the overall sound came in on one big blast of air, like the sensation you get when the train roars out of the tunnel at speed and you’re standing on the electric side of the yellow safety line. Pretty shocking and pretty arresting. I’m paying attention now, thank you.

This has happened to me before. Frequently. This is how it works for me at least. The big ideas, the big projects, the stuff that’s going to be really worth it, come in one super nova of compacted energy with all the trimmings. It is sort of like an extremely compressed moment that needs to be unpacked, expanded, stretched out, restored to its intended duration. Time compress Mahler’s Third Symphony so many times it plays back in less than one second. That’s what I’m talking about.

So from that moment on, the process is unraveling the contents of this hyper compacted image/sensation, trying to understand what is really there, digging into the fragments and piecing it together.

Figuring out how to make each of those fractions of a second into a track or a scene or a movement gets all hung up in the little bits of exactitude that tangible work requires. Precision and fantasy are strange associates, indeed. But without a commitment to make it true to the vision, what’s the point? The point is to try to realize the idea that has presented itself.

Inspiration is the spark, the flash that makes the idea great. Take it in whatever form it comes. Then realize the vision, strive to uphold the inspiration, fulfill identity.

Make it precise. Make it highly personal.

Make it logical

And irrational.

It is the passion and desire to not only live and breathe, but to go farther, reach out, dig down into the very corners of identity and discover stuff. It is the determination to not give up, to not settle, to not turn away when it gets too loud or hard or cold or wet.

Inspiration needs to be cultivated, expanded, encouraged. It needs raw, unfiltered experience. It needs a big shove in the direction of a sharper focus, a more penetrating analysis, a more thorough study, and a more vibrant pallet of colors, textures, and forms.

New insights, new inputs, don’t stay new for very long. The same old inputs, the same old experiences aren’t going to generate new ideas. Just as the worn out computer-

programmer-geek saying puts it – garbage in, garbage out – old experiences in, old inspiration out. That’s just about it. And I’ve seen it happen to myself and others so often that now it’s the thing I strive to avoid more than anything else.

Inspiration needs an ever-expanding vision. That’s all.

It’s a process that never stops, never reaches a level of blissful satisfaction.

Inspiration demands us to, ever more precisely, examine who we are and what we are trying to say.

Everyday, day after day, year after year.

From now on.

Afterword

Across the river I go.



This is not a story. This is what really happened. And your story is just as real, just as creative, just as inspired. Some days will be better than others. But with these stories, I've tried to share examples, provide a little deep research, into the kinds of things that everyone has to deal with. The demons of uncertainty, self-doubt, and fear of failure are out there trying to sneak into everyone's head, trying to distract and disappoint, and even depress us into believing our ideas are just not worthy or our abilities are not good enough.

It's crap. Over all these years, all these students I've worked with, all these professional musicians I known, loved, and performed with, has shown me that it is experience that rules this game. Being it. Doing it. Over and over. With an unwavering heart and soul. And in the end, the power of creativity, the intensity of the art will cut through. Ride this merry-go-round enough times and you will have seen enough of the landscape to know there's a lot more energy behind the conviction of experience than the deflated vacuum of negativity that tries to get our attention and turn us away.

Don't give in, ever. This is too important to give up. I wrote these books on creativity because we need each of us to be innovators, artists, creators. We need each of us to know how this works so we can go out there and fix the problems that are confronting us. Creativity is the solution because the only thing that's going to correct the stuff that's pulling us down as a people and as a world is some seriously powerful new ideas. Money isn't going to fix it, laws won't fix it, repression and wars won't fix it. But ideas can.

The soil of our ability to create, to express ideas in art, is the dust and sweat and experience gained as we keep at it. Conviction and trust in our identity as an artist is won through experience alone. It is not born into us, it is not given. It is made, earned, achieved by our creative practice. Doing it, and doing it again. The soil is our experience, it gives us ideas, support, creative sustenance; we draw from it, search it, dig deeper into it, and we grow, change, become bolder, more developed, expansive. Like the live oaks in Audubon Park in New Orleans, our reach expands outward and upward, we bear the marks of time, skill, courage, resilience, and permanence. Upon years these trees have stood and will stand. And as we dig deeper, transform, the lessons learned become the platform and the foundation for our own reach, our own breadth, and our own assurance of continuity. Creativity is, in fact, lasting. Artistry is solid and

permanent. It's the foundation, the soil that holds us, keeps us going, gives us new insights and new directions. Creativity, it can change our lives and raise us all up.
Be firm in your roots and stand up for the artist within!

A note of thanks

Thank you for reading my book. If you enjoyed or were inspired maybe, won't you please take a moment to leave me a review at your favorite retailer? And I hope you'll stay in touch. Share your thoughts about creativity and what works for you. I look forward to hearing your ideas!

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