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How To Be CREATIVE

MacLeod highlights the value of authenticity and hard work, and reveals the challenges and rewards of being creative. *continued* ▶

by Hugh MacLeod

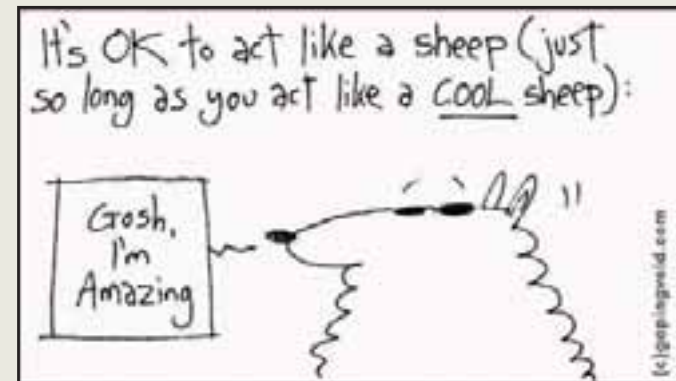


So you want to be more creative in art, in business, whatever. Here are some tips that have worked for me over the years.

1.

Ignore everybody.

The more original your idea is, the less good advice other people will be able to give you. When I first started with the cartoon-on-back-of-bizcard format, people thought I was nuts. Why wasn't I trying to do something more easy for markets to digest, i.e., cutie-pie greeting cards or whatever?



You don't know if your idea is any good the moment it's created. Neither does anyone else. The most you can hope for is a strong gut feeling that it is. And trusting your feelings is not as easy as the optimists say it is. There's a reason why feelings scare us.

And asking close friends never works quite as well as you hope, either. It's not that they deliberately want to be unhelpful. It's just they don't know your world one millionth as well as you know your world, no matter how hard they try, no matter how hard you try to explain.

Plus, a big idea will change you. Your friends may love you, but they don't want you to change. If you change, then their dynamic with you also changes. They like things the way they are, that's how they love you—the way you are, not the way you may become.

Ergo, they have no incentive to see you change. And they will be resistant to anything that catalyzes it. That's human nature. And you would do the same, if the shoe were on the other foot.

With business colleagues, it's even worse. They're used to dealing with you in a certain way. They're used to having a certain level of control over the relationship. And they want whatever makes them more prosperous. Sure, they might prefer it if you prosper as well, but that's not their top priority.

Good ideas alter the **power balance** in relationships,
that is why **good ideas** are always **initially resisted**.

If your idea is so good that it changes your dynamic enough to where you need them less or, God forbid, **THE MARKET** needs them less, then they're going to resist your idea every chance they can.

Again, that's human nature.

Good ideas alter the power balance in relationships, that is why good ideas are always initially resisted.

Good ideas come with a heavy burden. Which is why so few people have them. So few people can handle it.

2.

The idea doesn't have to be big. It just has to change the world.

The two are not the same thing.

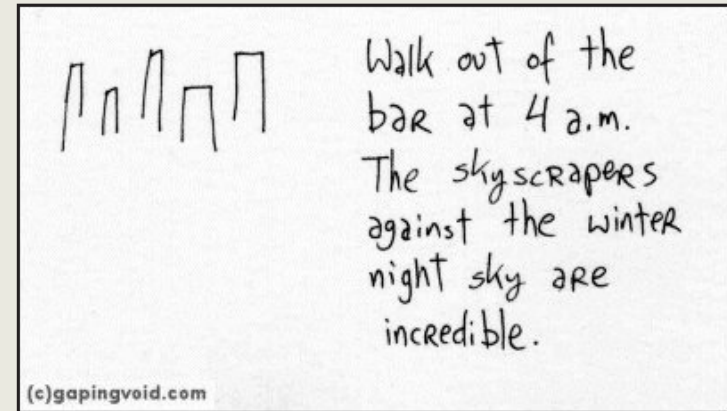
We all spend a lot of time being impressed by folks we've never met. Somebody featured in the media who's got a big company, a big product, a big movie, a big bestseller. Whatever.

And we spend even more time trying unsuccessfully to keep up with them. Trying to start up our own companies, our own products, our own film projects, books and whatnot.

I'm as guilty as anyone. I tried lots of different things over the years, trying desperately to pry my career out of the jaws of mediocrity. Some to do with business, some to do with art, etc.

One evening, after one false start too many, I just gave up. Sitting at a bar, feeling a bit burned out by work and life in general, I just started drawing on the back of business cards for no reason. I didn't really need a reason. I just did it because it was there, because it amused me in a kind of random, arbitrary way.

Of course it was stupid. Of course it wasn't commercial. Of course it wasn't going to go anywhere. Of course it was a complete and utter waste of time. But in retrospect, it was this built-in futility that gave it its edge. Because it was the exact opposite of all the "Big Plans"



my peers and I were used to making. It was so liberating not to have to be thinking about all that, for a change.

It was so liberating to be doing something that didn't have to impress anybody, for a change.

It was so liberating to have something that belonged just to me and no one else, for a change.

It was so liberating to feel complete sovereignty, for a change. To feel complete freedom, for a change.

And of course, it was then, and only then, that the outside world started paying attention.

The **sovereignty** you have over your work will **inspire** far more people than the **actual content** ever will.

The sovereignty you have over your work will inspire far more people than the actual content ever will. How your own sovereignty inspires other people to find their own sovereignty, their own sense of freedom and possibility, will change the world far more than the the work's objective merits ever will.

Your idea doesn't have to be big. It just has to be yours alone. The more the idea is yours alone, the more freedom you have to do something really amazing.

The more amazing, the more people will click with your idea. The more people click with your idea, the more it will change the world.

That's what doodling on business cards taught me.

3.

Put the hours in.

Doing anything worthwhile takes forever. 90% of what separates successful people and failed people is time, effort, and stamina.

I get asked a lot, “Your business card format is very simple. Aren’t you worried about somebody ripping it off?”



Standard Answer: Only if they can draw more of them than me, better than me.

What gives the work its edge is the simple fact that I’ve spent years drawing them. I’ve drawn thousands. Tens of thousands of man-hours.

So if somebody wants to rip my idea off, go ahead. If somebody wants to overtake me in the business card doodle wars, go ahead. You’ve got many long years in front of you. And unlike me, you won’t be doing it for the joy of it. You’ll be doing it for some self-loathing, ill-informed, lame-ass mercenary reason. So the years will be even longer and far, far more painful. Lucky you.

If somebody in your industry is more successful than you, it’s probably because he works harder at it than you do. Sure, maybe he’s more inherently talented, more adept at networking, etc., but I don’t consider that an excuse. Over time, that advantage counts for less and less. Which is why the world is full of highly talented, network-savvy, failed mediocrities.

So yeah, success means you've got a long road ahead of you, regardless. How do you best manage it?

Well, as I've written elsewhere, don't quit your day job. I didn't. I work every day at the office, same as any other regular schmo. I have a long commute on the train; ergo that's when I do most of my drawing. When I was younger I drew mostly while sitting at a bar, but that got old.

Put the hours in; do it for long enough and **magical**,
life-transforming things happen eventually.

The point is, an hour or two on the train is very manageable for me. The fact I have a job means I don't feel pressured to do something market-friendly. Instead, I get to do whatever the hell I want. I get to do it for my own satisfaction. And I think that makes the work more powerful in the long run. It also makes it easier to carry on with it in a calm fashion, day-in-day-out, and not go crazy in insane, creative bursts brought on by money worries.

The day job, which I really like, gives me something productive and interesting to do among fellow adults. It gets me out of the house in the daytime. If I were a professional cartoonist, I'd just be chained to a drawing table at home all day, scribbling out a living in silence, interrupted only by frequent trips to the coffee shop. No, thank you.

Simply put, my method allows me to pace myself over the long haul, which is important.

Stamina is utterly important. And stamina is only possible if it's managed well. People think all they need to do is endure one crazy, intense, job-free creative burst and their dreams will come true. They are wrong, they are stupidly wrong.

Being good at anything is like figure skating—the definition of being good at it is being able to make it look easy. But it never is easy. Ever. That’s what the stupidly wrong people conveniently forget.

If I was just starting out writing, say, a novel or a screenplay, or maybe starting up a new software company, I wouldn’t try to quit my job in order to make this big, dramatic, heroic-quest thing about it.

I would do something far simpler: I would find that extra hour or two in the day that belongs to nobody else but me, and I would make it productive. Put the hours in; do it for long enough and magical, life-transforming things happen eventually. Sure, that means less time watching TV, Internet-surfing, going out, or whatever.

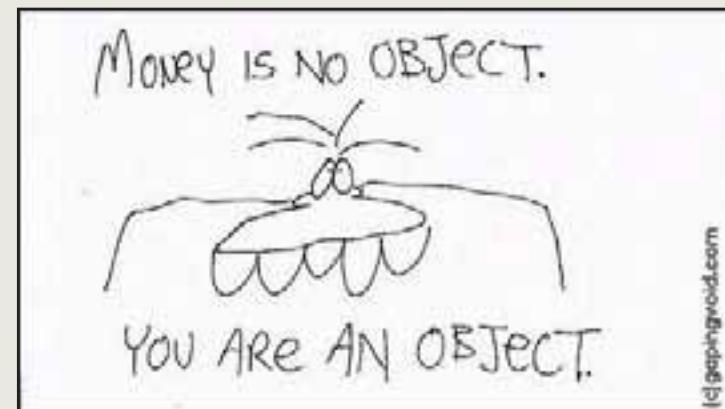
But who cares?

4.

If your biz plan depends on you suddenly being “discovered” by some big shot, your plan will probably fail.

Nobody suddenly discovers anything. Things are made slowly and in pain.

I was offered a quite substantial publishing deal a year or two ago. Turned it down. The company sent me a contract. I looked it over.



Hmmmm...

Called the company back. Asked for some clarifications on some points in the contract. Never heard back from them. The deal died.

This was a very respected company. You may have even heard of it.

They just assumed I must be just like all the other people they represent—hungry and desperate and willing to sign anything.

They wanted to own me, regardless of how good a job they did.

That's the thing about some big publishers. They want 110% from you, but they don't offer to do likewise in return. To them, the artist is just one more noodle in a big bowl of pasta.

Their business model is to basically throw the pasta against the wall, and see which one sticks. The ones that fall to the floor are just forgotten.

Publishers are just middlemen. That's all. If artists could remember that more often, they'd save themselves a lot of aggravation.

Anyway, yeah, I can see gapingvoid being a 'product' one day. Books, T-shirts and whatnot. I think it could make a lot of money, if handled correctly. But I'm not afraid to walk away if I think the person offering it is full of hot air. I've already got my groove, etc. Not to mention [another career](#) that's doing quite well, thank you.

I think the gaping void-as-product-line idea is pretty inevitable, down the road. Watch this space.

TIP

Click on an underlined hyperlink to visit that site. For more tips like this, visit ([i](#)).

GO

5.

You are responsible for your own experience.

Nobody can tell you if what you're doing is good, meaningful or worthwhile. The more compelling the path, the lonelier it is.

Every creative person is looking for "The Big Idea." You know, the one that is going to catapult them out from the murky depths of obscurity and on to the highest planes of incandescent lucidity.

The one that's all love-at-first-sight with the Zeitgeist.

The one that's going to get them invited to all the right parties, metaphorical or otherwise.

So naturally you ask yourself, if and when you finally come up with The Big Idea, after years of toil, struggle and doubt, how do you know whether or not it is "The One?"

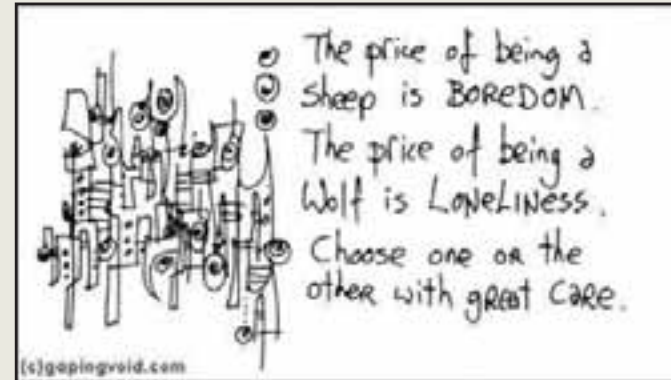
Answer: You don't.

There's no glorious swelling of existential triumph. That's not what happens.

All you get is this rather kvetchy voice inside you that seems to say, "This is totally stupid. This is utterly moronic. This is a complete waste of time. I'm going to do it anyway."

And you go do it anyway.

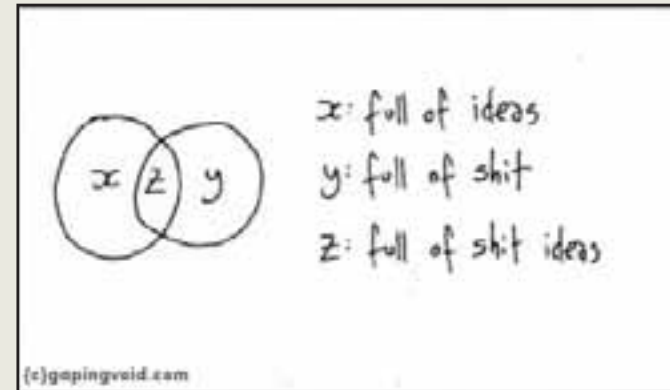
Second-rate ideas like glorious swellings far more. Keeps them alive longer.



6.

**Everyone is born creative;
everyone is given a box of
crayons in kindergarten.**

Then when you hit puberty they take the crayons away and replace them with books on algebra etc. Being suddenly hit years later with the creative bug is just a wee voice telling you, “I’d like my crayons back, please.”



So you’ve got the itch to do something. Write a screenplay, start a painting, write a book, turn your recipe for fudge brownies into a proper business, whatever. You don’t know where the itch came from; it’s almost like it just arrived on your doorstep, uninvited. Until now you were quite happy holding down a real job, being a regular person...Until now.

You don’t know if you’re any good or not, but you’d think you could be. And the idea terrifies you. The problem is, even if you are good, you know nothing about this kind of business. You don’t know any publishers or agents or all these fancy-shmancy kind of folk. You have a friend who’s got a cousin in California who’s into this kind of stuff, but you haven’t talked to your friend for over two years...

Besides, if you write a book, what if you can’t find a publisher? If you write a screenplay, what if you can’t find a producer? And what if the producer turns out to be a crook? You’ve always worked hard your whole life; you’ll be damned if you’ll put all that effort into something if there ain’t no pot of gold at the end of this dumb-ass rainbow...

Heh. That's not your wee voice asking for the crayons back. That's your outer voice, your adult voice, your boring and tedious voice trying to find a way to get the wee crayon voice to shut the hell up.

They're **only crayons**. You **didn't fear them** in kindergarten, **why fear them now?**

Your wee voice doesn't want you to sell something. Your wee voice wants you to make something. There's a big difference. Your wee voice doesn't give a damn about publishers or Hollywood producers.

Go ahead and make something. Make something really special. Make something amazing that will really blow the mind of anybody who sees it.

If you try to make something just to fit your uninformed view of some hypothetical market, you will fail. If you make something special and powerful and honest and true, you will succeed.

The wee voice didn't show up because it decided you need more money or you need to hang out with movie stars. Your wee voice came back because your soul somehow depends on it. There's something you haven't said, something you haven't done, some light that needs to be switched on, and it needs to be taken care of. Now.

So you have to listen to the wee voice or it will die...taking a big chunk of you along with it.

They're only crayons. You didn't fear them in kindergarten, why fear them now?

7.

Keep your day job.

I'm not just saying that for the usual reason i.e., because I think your idea will fail. I'm saying it because to suddenly quit one's job in a big ol' creative drama-queen moment is always, always, always in direct conflict with what I call "The Sex & Cash Theory."

THE SEX & CASH THEORY: The creative person basically has two kinds of jobs. One is the sexy, creative kind. Second is the kind that pays the bills. Sometimes the task in hand covers both bases, but not often. This tense duality will always play center stage. It will never be transcended.

A good example is Phil, a NY photographer friend of mine. He does really wild stuff for the indie magazines—it pays nothing, but it allows him to build his portfolio. Then he'll go off and shoot some catalogs for a while. Nothing too exciting, but it pays the bills.

Another example is somebody like Martin Amis. He writes "serious" novels, but he has to supplement his income by writing the occasional newspaper article for the London papers (novel royalties are bloody pathetic—even bestsellers like Amis aren't immune).

Or actors. One year Travolta will be in an ultra-hip flick like Pulp Fiction ("Sex"), the next he'll be in some dumb spy thriller ("Cash").

Or painters. You spend one month painting blue pictures because that's the color the celebri-



ty collectors are buying this season (“Cash”), you spend the next month painting red pictures because secretly you despise the color blue and love the color red (“Sex”).

Or geeks. You spend you weekdays writing code for a faceless corporation (“Cash”), then you spend your evening and weekends writing anarchic, weird computer games with which to amuse your techie friends (“Sex”).

The **creative person** basically has **two kinds** of jobs.

One is the **sexy**, creative kind. Second is the kind that **pays the bills**.

It’s balancing the need to make a good living while still maintaining one’s creative sovereignty. My M.O. is gapingvoid (“Sex”), coupled with my day job (“Cash”).

I’m thinking about the young writer who has to wait tables to pay the bills, in spite of her writing appearing in all the cool and hip magazines...who dreams of one day of not having her life divided so harshly.

Well, over time the “harshly” bit might go away, but not the “divided.” This tense duality will always play center stage. It will never be transcended.

As soon as you accept this, I mean really accept this, for some reason your career starts moving ahead faster. I don’t know why this happens. It’s the people who refuse to cleave their lives this way—who just want to start Day One by quitting their current crappy day job and moving straight on over to best-selling author...well, they never make it.

Anyway, it’s called “The Sex & Cash Theory.” Keep it under your pillow.

8.

Companies that squelch creativity can no longer compete with companies that champion creativity.

Nor can you bully a subordinate into becoming a genius.

Since the modern, scientifically-conceived corporation was invented in the early half of the Twentieth Century, creativity has been sacrificed in favor of forwarding the interests of the “Team Player.”

Fair enough. There was more money in doing it that way; that’s why they did it.

There’s only one problem. Team Players are not very good at creating value on their own. They are not autonomous; they need a team in order to exist.

So now corporations are awash with non-autonomous thinkers.

“I don’t know. What do you think?”

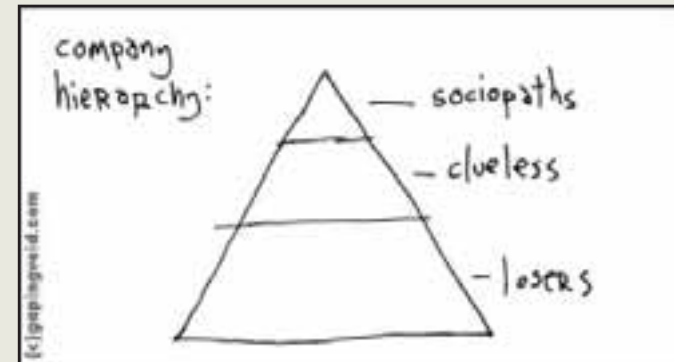
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“I don’t know. What do you think?”



And so on.

Creating an economically viable entity where lack of original thought is handsomely rewarded creates a rich, fertile environment for parasites to breed. And that's exactly what's been happening. So now we have millions upon millions of human tapeworms thriving in the Western World, making love to their Powerpoint presentations, feasting on the creativity of others.

We have millions upon millions of **human tapeworms** thriving in the Western World, making love to their **Powerpoint presentations**, feasting on the **creativity of others**.

What happens to an ecology, when the parasite level reaches critical mass?

The ecology dies.

If you're creative, if you can think independently, if you can articulate passion, if you can override the fear of being wrong, then your company needs you now more than it ever did. And now your company can no longer afford to pretend that isn't the case.

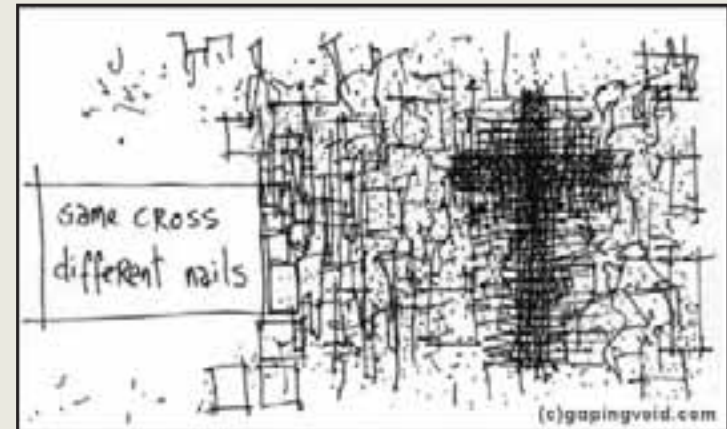
So dust off your horn and start tooting it. Exactly.

However if you're not particularly creative, then you're in real trouble. And there's no buzzword or "new paradigm" that can help you. They may not have mentioned this in business school, but...people like watching dinosaurs die.

9.

Everybody has their own private Mount Everest they were put on this earth to climb.

You may never reach the summit; for that you will be forgiven. But if you don't make at least one serious attempt to get above the snow line, years later you will find yourself lying on your deathbed, and all you will feel is emptiness.



This metaphorical Mount Everest doesn't have to manifest itself as "Art." For some people, yes, it might be a novel or a painting. But Art is just one path up the mountain, one of many. With others, the path may be something more prosaic. Making a million dollars, raising a family, owning the most Burger King franchises in the Tri-State area, building some crazy over-sized model airplane, the list has no end.

Whatever. Let's talk about you now. Your mountain. Your private Mount Everest. Yes, that one. Exactly.

Let's say you never climb it. Do you have a problem with that? Can you just say to yourself, "Never mind, I never really wanted it anyway," and take up stamp-collecting instead?

Well, you could try. But I wouldn't believe you. I think it's not okay for you never to try to climb it. And I think you agree with me. Otherwise, you wouldn't have read this far.

So it looks like you're going to have to climb the frickin' mountain. Deal with it.

My advice? You don't need my advice. You really don't. The biggest piece of advice I could give anyone would be this:

"Admit that your own private Mount Everest exists. That is half the battle."

And you've already done that. You really have. Otherwise, again, you wouldn't have read this far. Rock on.

10.

The more talented somebody is, the less they need the props.

Meeting a person who wrote a masterpiece on the back of a deli menu would not surprise me. Meeting a person who wrote a masterpiece with a silver Cartier fountain pen on an antique writing table in an airy SoHo loft would SERIOUSLY surprise me.



Abraham Lincoln wrote The Gettysburg Address on a piece of ordinary stationery that he had borrowed from the friend in whose house he was staying.

James Joyce wrote with a simple pencil and notebook. Somebody else did the typing, but only much later.

Van Gogh rarely painted with more than six colors on his palette.

I draw on the back of wee biz cards. Whatever.

There's no correlation between creativity and equipment ownership. None. Zilch. Nada.

Actually, as the artist gets more into his thing, and as he gets more successful, his number of tools tends to go down. He knows what works for him. Expending mental energy on stuff wastes time. He's a man on a mission. He's got a deadline. He's got some rich client breathing down his neck. The last thing he wants is to spend 3 weeks learning how to use a router drill if he doesn't need to.

A fancy tool just gives the **second-rater** one more pillar to **hide behind**. Which is why there are so many **hack writers** with **state-of-the-art laptops**.

A fancy tool just gives the second-rater one more pillar to hide behind.

Which is why there are so many second-rate art directors with state-of-the-art Macintosh computers.

Which is why there are so many hack writers with state-of-the-art laptops.

Which is why there are so many crappy photographers with state-of-the-art digital cameras.

Which is why there are so many unremarkable painters with expensive studios in trendy neighborhoods.

Hiding behind pillars, all of them.

Pillars do not help; they hinder. The more mighty the pillar, the more you end up relying on it psychologically, the more it gets in your way.

And this applies to business, as well.

Which is why there are so many failing businesses with fancy offices.

Which is why there's so many failing businessmen spending a fortune on fancy suits and expensive yacht club memberships.

Again, hiding behind pillars.

Successful people, artists and non-artists alike, are very good at spotting pillars. They're very good at doing without them. Even more importantly, once they've spotted a pillar, they're very good at quickly getting rid of it.

Good pillar management is one of the most valuable talents you can have on the planet. If you have it, I envy you. If you don't, I pity you.

Sure, nobody's perfect. We all have our pillars. We seem to need them. You are never going to live a pillar-free existence. Neither am I.

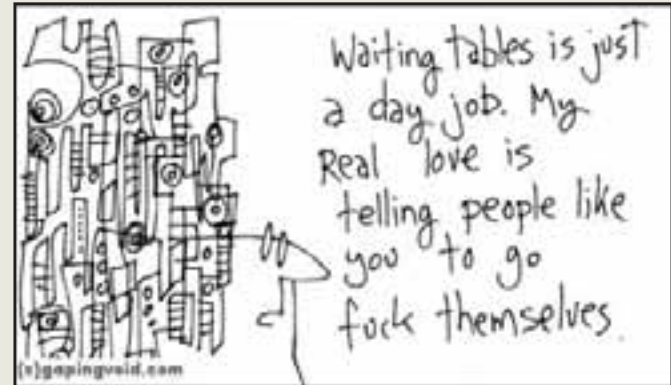
All we can do is keep asking the question, "Is this a pillar?" about every aspect of our business, our craft, our reason for being alive, etc., and go from there. The more we ask, the better we get at spotting pillars, the more quickly the pillars vanish.

Ask. Keep asking. And then ask again. Stop asking and you're dead.

11.

Don't try to stand out from the crowd; avoid crowds altogether.

Your plan for getting your work out there has to be as original as the actual work, perhaps even more so. The work has to create a totally new market. There's no point trying to do the same thing as 250,000 other young hopefuls, waiting for a miracle. All existing business models are wrong. Find a new one.



I've seen it so many times. Call him Ted. A young kid in the big city, just off the bus, wanting to be a famous something: artist, writer, musician, film director, whatever. He's full of fire, full of passion, full of ideas. And you meet Ted again five or ten years later, and he's still tending bar at the same restaurant. He's not a kid anymore. But he's still no closer to his dream.

His voice is still as defiant as ever, certainly, but there's an emptiness to his words that wasn't there before.

Yeah, well, Ted probably chose a very well-trodden path. Write novel, be discovered, publish bestseller, sell movie rights, retire rich in 5 years. Or whatever.

No worries that there are probably three million other novelists/actors/musicians/painters etc with the same plan. But of course, Ted's special. Of course his fortune will defy the odds eventually. Of course. That's what he keeps telling you, as he refills your glass.

Is your plan of a similar ilk? If it is, then I'd be concerned.

When I started the business card cartoons I was lucky; at the time I had a pretty well-paid corporate job in New York that I liked. The idea of quitting it in order to join the ranks of Bohemia didn't even occur to me. What, leave Manhattan for Brooklyn? Ha. Not bloody likely. I was just doing it to amuse myself in the evenings, to give me something to do at the bar while I waited for my date to show up or whatever.

There was no commercial incentive or larger agenda governing my actions. If I wanted to draw on the back of a business card instead of a "proper" medium, I could. If I wanted to use a four-letter word, I could. If I wanted to ditch the standard figurative format and draw psychotic abstractions instead, I could. There was no flashy media or publishing executive to keep happy. And even better, there was no artist-lifestyle archetype to conform to.

It gave me a lot of freedom. That freedom paid off in spades, later.

Question how much freedom your path affords you. Be utterly ruthless about it.

It's your freedom that will get you to where you want to go. Blind faith in an over-subscribed, vainglorious myth will only hinder you.

Is your plan unique? Is there nobody else doing it? Then I'd be excited. A little scared, maybe, but excited.

12.

If you accept the pain, it cannot hurt you.

The pain of making the necessary sacrifices always hurts more than you think it's going to. I know. It sucks. That being said, doing something seriously creative is one of the most amazing experiences one can have, in this or any other lifetime. If you can pull it off, it's worth it. Even if you don't end up pulling it off, you'll learn many incredible, magical, valuable things. It's NOT doing it when you know you full well you HAD the opportunity—that hurts FAR more than any failure.

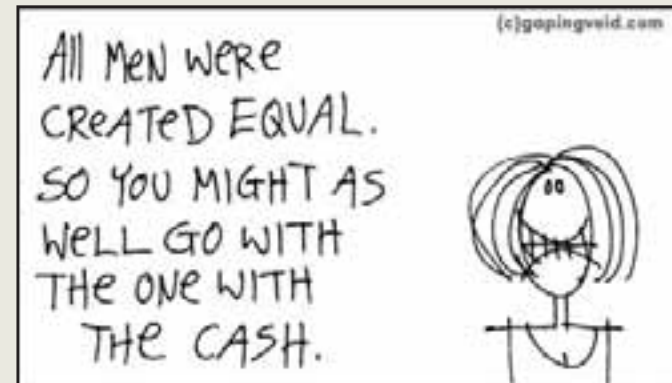
Frankly, I think you're better off doing something on the assumption that you will NOT be rewarded for it, that it will NOT receive the recognition it deserves, that it will NOT be worth the time and effort invested in it.

The obvious advantage to this angle is, of course, if anything good comes of it, then it's an added bonus.

The second, more subtle and profound advantage is: that by scuppering all hope of worldly and social betterment from the creative act, you are finally left with only one question to answer:

Do you make this damn thing exist or not?

And once you can answer that truthfully to yourself, the rest is easy.



13.

Never compare your inside with somebody else's outside.

The more you practice your craft, the less you confuse worldly rewards with spiritual rewards, and vice versa. Even if your path never makes any money or furthers your career, that's still worth a TON.

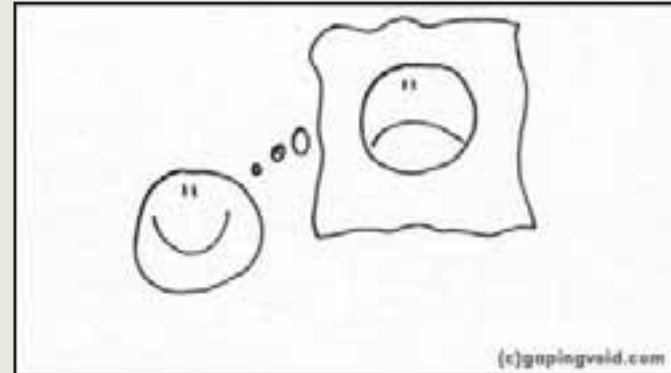
When I was 16 or 17 in Edinburgh I vaguely knew this guy who owned a shop called "Cinders," on St. Stephen's Street. It specialized in restoring antique fireplaces.

Cinders' modus operandi was very simple. Buy original Georgian and Victorian chimneypieces from old, dilapidated houses for 10 cents on the dollar, give them a loving but expedient makeover in the workshop, sell them at vast profit to yuppies.

Back then I was insatiably curious about how people made a living (I still am). So one day, while sitting on his stoop I chatted with the fireplace guy about it.

He told me about the finer points of his trade—the hunting through old houses, the craftsmanship, the customer relations, and of course the profit.

The fellow seemed quite proud of his job. From how he described it he seemed to like his trade and be making a decent living. Scotland was going through a bit of a recession at the time; unemployment was high, money was tight; I guess for an aging hippie things could've been a lot worse.



Very few kids ever said, “Gosh, when I grow up I’m going to be a fireplace guy!” It’s not the most obvious trade in the world. I asked him about how he fell into it.

...doing something **seriously creative** is one of the most amazing **experiences** one can have, in this or **any other lifetime**.

“I used to be an antiques dealer,” he said. “People who spend a lot of money on antiques also seem to spend a lot of money restoring their houses. So I sort of got the whiff of opportunity just by talking to people in my antiques shop. Also, there are too many antique dealers in Edinburgh crowding the market, so I was looking for an easier way to make a living.”

Like the best jobs in the world, it just kinda sorta happened.

“Well, some of the fireplaces are real beauties,” I said. “It must be hard parting with them.”

“No it isn’t,” he said (and this is the part I remember most). “I mean, I like them, but because they take up so much room—they’re so big and bulky—I’m relieved to be rid of them once they’re sold. I just want them out of the shop ASAP and the cash in my pocket. Selling them is easy for me. Unlike antiques. I always loved antiques, so I was always falling in love with the inventory, I always wanted to hang on to my best stuff. I’d always subconsciously price them too high in order to keep them from leaving the shop.”

Being young and idealistic, I told him I thought that was quite sad. Why choose to sell a “mere product” (i.e., chimneypieces) when instead you could make your living selling something you really care about (i.e., antiques)? Surely the latter would be a preferable way to work.

“The first rule of business,” he said, chuckling at my naiveté, “is never sell something you love. Otherwise, you may as well be selling your children.”

Fifteen years later, I’m at a bar in New York. Some friend-of-a-friend is looking at my cartoons. He asks me if I publish. I tell him I don’t. Tell him it’s just a hobby. Tell him about my advertising job.

“Man, why the hell are you in advertising?” he says, pointing to my portfolio. “You should be doing this. Galleries and shit.”

“Advertising’s just chimney pieces,” I say, speaking into my glass.

“What the fuck?”

“Never mind.”

14.

Dying young is overrated.

I’ve seen so many young people take the “Gotta do the drugs & booze thing to make me a better artist” route over the years. A choice that wasn’t smart, original, effective, or healthy, nor ended happily.

It’s a familiar story: a kid reads about [Charlie Parker](#) or [Jimi Hendrix](#) or [Charles Bukowski](#) and somehow decides that their poetic but flawed example somehow gives him



permission and/or absolution to spend the next decade or two drowning in his own metaphorical vomit.

The bars of West Hollywood and New York are awash
with people **throwing their lives** away in the
desperate hope of **finding a shortcut**, any shortcut.

Of course, the older you get, the more casualties of this foolishness you meet. The more time has had to ravage their lives. The more pathetic they seem. And the less remarkable work they seem to have to show for it, for all their “amazing experiences” and “special insights.”

The smarter and more talented the artist is, the less likely he will choose this route. Sure, he might screw around a wee bit while he’s young and stupid, but he will move on quicker than most.

But the kid thinks it’s all about talent: he thinks it’s all about “potential.” He underestimates how much time, discipline and stamina also play their part. Sure, like Bukowski et al., there are exceptions. But that is why we like their stories when we’re young. Because they are exceptional stories. And every kid with a guitar or a pen or a paintbrush or an idea for a new business wants to be exceptional. Every kid underestimates his competition, and overestimates his chances. Every kid is a sucker for the idea that there’s a way to make it without having to do the actual hard work.

So the bars of West Hollywood and New York are awash with people throwing their lives away in the desperate hope of finding a shortcut, any shortcut. And a lot of them aren't even young anymore; their B-plans having been washed away by vodka & tonics years ago.

Meanwhile their competition is at home, working their asses off.

15.

The most important thing a creative person can learn, professionally, is where to draw the red line that separates what you are willing to do, and what you are not.

Art suffers the moment other people start paying for it. The more you need the money, the more people will tell you what to do. The less control you will have. The more bullshit you will have to swallow. The less joy it will bring. Know this and plan accordingly.

Recently, I heard [Chris Ware](#), currently one of the top 2 or 3 most critically acclaimed cartoonists on the planet, describe his profession as “unrewarding.”

When the guy at the top of the ladder you're climbing describes the view from the top as “unrewarding,” be concerned. Heh.

I knew Chris back in college, at The University of Texas. Later, in the early 1990's I knew him hanging around [Wicker Park](#) in Chicago, that famous arty neighborhood, while he was getting



his Masters from The School of The Art Institute, and I was working as a junior copywriter at [Leo Burnett](#). We weren't that close, but we had mutual friends. He's a nice guy. Smart as hell.

So I've watched him over the years go from talented undergraduate to famous rockstar comic strip guy. Nice to see, certainly—it's encouraging when people you know get deservedly famous. But also it was really helpful for me to see first-hand the realities of being a professional cartoonist, both good and bad. It's nice to get a snapshot of reality.

His example really clarified a lot for me about 5–10 years ago when I got to the point where my cartoons got good enough to where I could actually consider doing it professionally. I looked at the market, saw the kind of life Chris and others like him had, saw the people in the business calling the shots, saw the kind of deluded planet most cartoon publishers were living on, and went, “Naaaah.”

Thinking about it some more, I think one of the main reasons I stayed in advertising is simply because hearing “change that ad” pisses me off a lot less than “change that cartoon.” Though the compromises one has to make writing ads can often be tremendous, there's only so much you have to take personally. It's their product, it's their money, so it's easier to maintain healthy boundaries. With cartooning, I invariably found this impossible.

The most important thing a creative person can learn, professionally, is where to draw the red line that separates what you are willing to do, and what you are not. It is this red line that demarcates your sovereignty, that defines your own private creative domain. What shit you are willing to take, and what shit you're not. What you are willing to relinquish control over, and what you aren't. What price you are willing to pay, and what price you aren't. Everybody is different; everybody has his or her own red line. Everybody has his or her own [Sex and Cash Theory](#).

When I see somebody “suffering for their art,” it's usually a case of them not knowing where that red line is, not knowing where the sovereignty lies.

TIP

Click on an underlined hyperlink to visit that site. For more tips like this, visit ([i](#)).

GO

Somehow he thought that sleazy producer wouldn't make him butcher his film with pointless rewrites, but alas! Somehow he thought that gallery owner would turn out to be a competent businessman, but alas! Somehow he thought that publisher would promote his new novel properly, but alas! Somehow he thought that Venture Capitalist would be less of an asshole about the start-up's cash flow, but alas! Somehow he thought that CEO would support his new marketing initiative, but alas!

Knowing where to draw the red line is like knowing yourself, like knowing who your real friends are. Some are better at it than others. Life is unfair.

16.

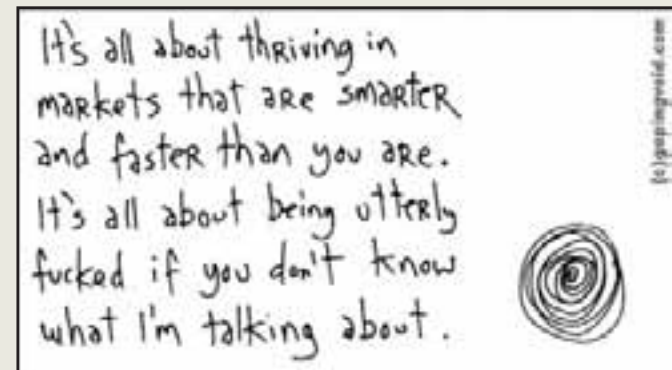
The world is changing.

Some people are hip to it, others are not. If you want to be able to afford groceries in 5 years, I'd recommend listening closely to the former and avoiding the latter. Just my two cents.

Your job is probably worth 50% what it was in real terms 10 years ago. And who knows? It may very well not exist in 5-10 years.

We all saw the traditional biz model in my industry, advertising, start going down the tubes 10 years or so ago. Our first reaction was "work harder."

It didn't work. People got shafted in the thousands. It's a cold world out there.



We thought being talented would save our asses. We thought working late and weekends would save our asses. Nope.

We thought the Internet and all that Next Big Thing, new media and new technology stuff would save our asses. We thought it would fill in the holes in the ever-more-intellectually-bankrupt solutions we were offering our clients. Nope.

When I see somebody “**suffering for their art,**”
it’s usually a case of them not knowing where that
red line is, not knowing where the **sovereignty lies.**

Whatever. Regardless of how the world changes, regardless of what new technologies, business models and social architectures are coming down the pike, the one thing “The New Realities” cannot take away from you is trust.

The people you trust and vice versa, this is what will feed you and pay for your kids’ college. Nothing else.

This is true if you’re an artist, writer, doctor, techie, lawyer, banker, or bartender. I.e., stop worrying about technology. Start worrying about people who trust you.

In order to navigate The New Realities you have to be creative—not just within your particular profession, but in EVERYTHING. Your way of looking at the world will need to become ever more fertile and original. And this isn’t just true for artists, writers, techies, Creative Directors and CEOs; this is true for EVERYBODY. Janitors, receptionists and bus drivers, too. The game has just been ratcheted up a notch.

The old ways are dead. And you need people around you who concur.

That means hanging out more with the creative people, the freaks, the real visionaries, than you're already doing. Thinking more about what their needs are, and responding accordingly. It doesn't matter what industry we're talking about—architecture, advertising, petrochemicals—they're around, they're easy enough to find if you make the effort, if you've got something worthwhile to offer in return. Avoid the dullards; avoid the folk who play it safe. They can't help you anymore. Their stability model no longer offers that much stability. They are extinct, they are extinction.

17.

Merit can be bought. Passion can't.

The only people who can change the world are people who want to. And not everybody does.

Human beings have this thing I call the "Pissed Off Gene." It's that bit of our psyche that makes us utterly dissatisfied with our lot, no matter how kindly fortune smiles upon us.

It's there for a reason. Back in our early caveman days being pissed off made us more likely to get off our butt, get out of the cave and into the tundra hunting woolly mammoth, so we'd have something to eat for supper. It's a survival mechanism. Damn useful then, damn useful now.



It's this same Pissed Off Gene that makes us want to create anything in the first place—drawings, violin sonatas, meat packing companies, websites. This same gene drove us to discover how to make a fire, the wheel, the bow and arrow, indoor plumbing, the personal computer, the list is endless.

Part of understanding the creative urge is understanding that it's primal. Wanting to change the world is not a noble calling; it's a primal calling.

We think we're "providing a superior integrated logistic system" or "helping America to really taste freshness." In fact we're just pissed off and want to get the hell out of the cave and kill the woolly mammoth.

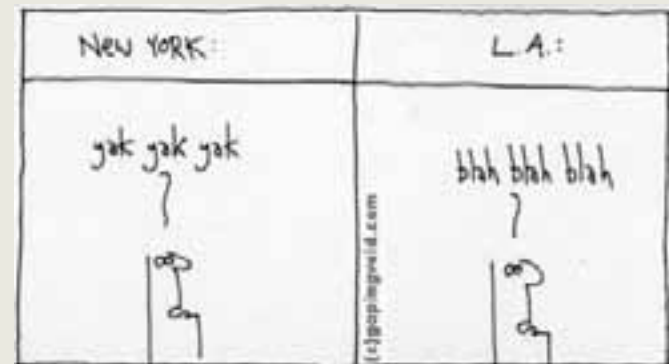
Your business either lets you go hunt the woolly mammoth or it doesn't. Of course, like so many white-collar jobs these days, you might very well be offered a ton of money to sit in the corner-office cave and pretend that you're hunting. That is sad. What's even sadder is if you agree to take the money.

18.

Avoid the Watercooler Gang.

They're a well-meaning bunch, but they get in the way eventually.

Back when I worked for a large advertising agency as a young rookie, it used to just bother me how much the "Watercooler Gang" just kvetched all the time. The



“Watercooler Gang” was my term for what was still allowed to exist in the industry back then. Packs of second-rate creatives, many years passed their sell-by date, being squeezed by the Creative Directors for every last ounce of juice they had, till it came time to firing them on the cheap. Taking too many trips to the watercooler and coming back drunk from lunch far too often. Working late nights and weekends on all the boring-but-profitable accounts. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze...

Your office could be awash with **Clios** and **One Show** awards, yet your **career** could still be down the **sinkhole**.

I remember some weeks where one could easily spend half an hour a day, listening to Ted complain.

Ted used to have a window office but now had a cube ever since that one disastrous meeting with Client X. He would come visit me in my cube at least once a day and start his thing. Complain, complain, complain...about whatever... how Josh-The-Golden-Boy was a shit writer and a complete phony...or how they bought Little-Miss-Hot-Pants’s ad instead of his, “even though mine was the best in the room and every bastard there knew it.”

Like I said, whatever.

It was endless...Yak Yak Yak... Oi vey! Ted, I love ya, you’re a great guy, but shut the hell up...

In retrospect, it was Ted’s example that taught me a very poignant lesson—back then I was still too young and naïve to have learned it by that point—that your office could be awash with **Clios** and **One Show** awards, yet your career could still be down the sinkhole.

Don't get me wrong—my career there was a complete disaster. This is not a case of one of the Alphas mocking the Betas. This is a Gamma mocking the Betas.

I'm having lunch with my associate, John, who's about the same age as me. Cheap and cheerful Thai food, just down the road from the agency.

“The **only reason** they like having me around is because I'm still **young and cheap**. The minute I am no longer either, **I'm dead meat**.”

“I gotta get out of this company,” I say.

“I thought you liked your job,” says John.

“I do,” I say. “But the only reason they like having me around is because I'm still young and cheap. The minute I am no longer either, I'm dead meat.”

“Like Ted,” says John.

“Yeah...him and the rest of The Watercooler Gang.”

“The Watercoolies,” laughs John.

So we had a good chuckle about our poor, hapless elders. We weren't that sympathetic, frankly. Their lives might have been hell then, but they had already had their glory moments. They had won their awards, flown off to The Bahamas to shoot toilet paper ads with famous movie stars and all that. Unlike us young'uns. John and I had only been out of college a

couple of years and had still yet to make our mark on the industry we had entered with about as much passion and hope as anybody alive.

We had sold a few newspaper ads now and then, some magazine spreads, but the TV stuff was still well beyond reach. So far, the agency we had worked for had yet to allow us to shine. Was this our fault or theirs? Maybe a little bit of both, but back then it was all “their fault, dammit!” Of course, everything is “their fault, dammit!” when you’re 24.

Back then it was all “**their fault, dammit!**” Of course, everything is “**their fault, dammit!**” **when you’re 24.**

I quit my job about a year later. John stayed on with the agency, for whatever reason, then about 5 years ago got married, with his first kid following soon after. Suddenly with a family to support he couldn’t afford to get fired. The Creative Director knew this and started to squeeze.

“You don’t mind working this weekend, John, do you? Good. I knew you wouldn’t. We all know how much the team relies on you to deliver at crunch time—that’s why we value you so highly, John, wouldn’t you say?”

Last time I saw John he was working at this horrible little agency for a fraction of his former salary. Turns out the big agency had tossed him out about a week after his kid’s second birthday.

We’re sitting there at the Thai restaurant again, having lunch for old time’s sake. We’re having a good time, talking about the usual artsy-fartsy stuff we always do. It’s a great conversation, marred only by the fact that I can’t get the word “watercooler” out of my goddamn head...

19.

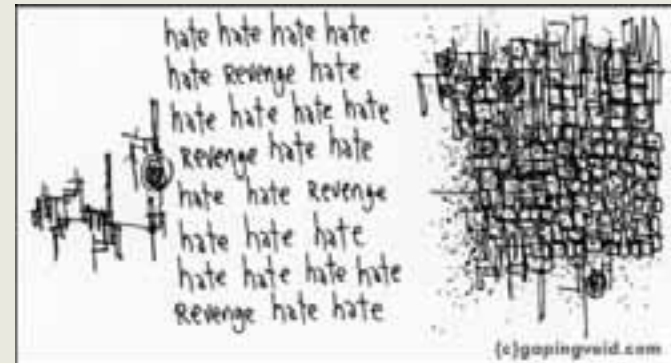
Sing in your own voice.

Picasso was a terrible colorist. Turner couldn't paint human beings worth a damn. Saul Steinberg's formal drafting skills were appalling. T.S. Eliot had a full-time day job. Henry Miller was a wildly uneven writer. Bob Dylan can't sing or play guitar.

But that didn't stop them, right?

So I guess the next question is, "Why not?"

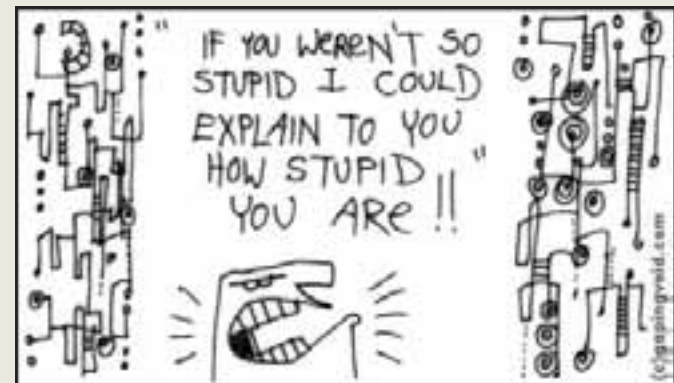
I have no idea. Why should it?



20.

The choice of media is irrelevant.

Every media's greatest strength is also its greatest weakness. Every form of media is a set of fundamental compromises; one is not "higher" than the other. A painting doesn't do much; it just sits there on a wall. That's



the best and worst thing thing about it. Film combines sound, movement, photography, music, acting. That's the best and worst thing thing about it. Prose just uses words arranged in linear form to get its point across. That's the best and worst thing thing about it, etc.

Back in college, I was an English Major. I had no aspirations for teaching, writing or academe; it was just a subject I could get consistently high grades in. Plus, I liked to read books and write papers, so it worked well enough for me.

My M.O. was, and still is, to just have **a normal life**,
be a regular schmo, with **a terrific hobby** on the side.

Most of my friends were Liberal Arts Majors, but there the similarity ended. We never really went to class together. I dunno, we'd meet up in the evenings and weekends, but I never really socialized with people in my classes that much.

So it was always surprising to me to meet the Art Majors: fine arts, film, drama, architecture, etc. They seemed to live in each other's pockets. They all seemed to work, eat, and sleep together. Lots of bonding going on. Lots of collaboration. Lots of incestuousness. Lots of speeches about the sanctity of their craft.

Well, a cartoon only needs one person to make it. Same with a piece of writing. No Big Group Hug required. So all this sex-fueled socialism was rather alien to me, even if parts of it seemed very appealing.

During my second year at college, I started getting my cartoons published, and not just the school paper. Suddenly I found meeting girls easy. I was very happy about that, I can assure you, but life carried on pretty much the same.

I suppose my friends thought the cartooning gigs were neat or whatever, but it wasn't really anything that affected our friendship. It was just something I did on the side, the way other people restored old cars or or kept a darkroom for their camera.

My M.O. was, and still is, to just have a normal life, be a regular schmo, with a terrific hobby on the side. It's not exactly rocket science.

Looking back, I also see a lot of **screwy kids** who married themselves to their **medium of choice** for the **wrong reasons**.

This attitude seemed kinda alien to the Art Majors I met. Their chosen art form seemed more like a religion to them. It was serious. It was important. It was a big part of their identity, and it almost seemed to them that humanity's very existence totally depended on them being able to pursue their dream as a handsomely rewarded profession etc.

Don't get me wrong, I knew some Art Majors who were absolutely brilliant. One or two of them are famous now. And I can see if you've got a special talent, how the need to seriously pursue it becomes important.

But looking back, I also see a lot of screwy kids who married themselves to their medium of choice for the wrong reasons. Not because they had anything particularly unique or visionary to say, but because it was cool. Because it was sexy. Because it was hip. Because it gave them something to talk about at parties. Because it was easier than thinking about getting a real job after graduation.

I'm in two minds about this. One part of me thinks it's good for kids to mess around with insanely high ambitions, and maybe one or two of them will make it, maybe one or two will survive the cull. That's what's being young is all about, and I think it's wonderful.

The other side of me wants to tell these kids to beware of choosing difficult art forms for the wrong reasons. You can wing it while you're young, but it's not till your youth is over that The Devil starts seeking out his due. And that's never pretty. I've seen it happen more than once to some very dear, sweet people, and it's really heartbreaking to watch.

21.

Selling out is harder than it looks.

Diluting your product to make it more “commercial” will just make people like it less.

Many years ago, barely out of college, I started schlepping around the ad agencies, looking for my first job.

One fine day a Creative Director kindly agreed for me to come show him my portfolio. Hooray!

So I came to his office and showed him my work. My work was bloody awful. All of it.

Imagine the worst, cheesiest “I used to wash with Sudso but now I wash with Lemon-Fresh Rinso Extreme” vapid housewife crap. Only far worse than that.



The CD was a nice guy. You could tell he didn't think much of my work, though he was far too polite to blurt it out. Finally he quietly confessed that it wasn't doing much for him.

"Well, the target market are middle class housewives," I rambled. "They're quite conservative, so I thought I'd better tone it down..."

"You can tone it down once you've gotten the job and once the client comes after your ass with a red hot poker and tells you to tone it down," he laughed. "Till then, show me the toned-up version."

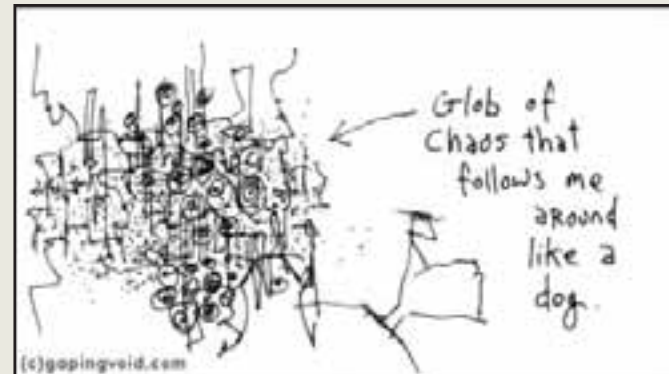
This story doesn't just happen in advertising. It happens everywhere.

22.

Nobody cares. Do it for yourself.

Everybody is too busy with their own lives to give a damn about your book, painting, screenplay, etc., especially if you haven't sold it yet. And the ones that aren't, you don't want in your life anyway.

Making a big deal over your creative shtick is the kiss of death. That's all I have to say on the subject.



23.

Worrying about “Commercial vs. Artistic” is a complete waste of time.

You can argue about “the shameful state of American Letters” till the cows come home. They were kvetching about it in 1950; they’ll be kvetching about it in 2050.

It’s a path well trodden, and not a place where one is going to come up with many new, earth-shattering insights.

But a lot of people like to dwell on it because it keeps them from having to ever journey into unknown territory. It’s safe. It allows you to have strong emotions and opinions without any real risk to yourself. Without you having to do any of the actual hard work involved in the making and selling of something you believe in.

To me, it’s not about whether Tom Clancy sells truckloads of books, or a Nobel Prize Winner sells diddlysquat. Those are just ciphers, a distraction. To me, it’s about what YOU are going to do with the short time you have left on this earth. Different criteria altogether.

Frankly, how a person nurtures and develops his or her own “creative sovereignty,” with or without the help of the world at large, is in my opinion a much more interesting subject.



24.

Don't worry about finding inspiration. It comes eventually.

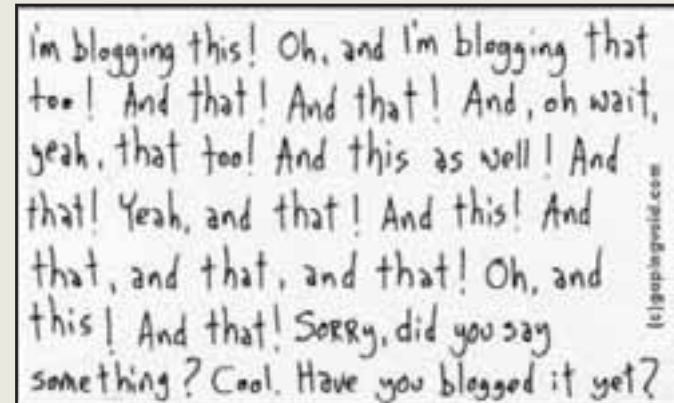
Inspiration precedes the desire to create, not the other way around.

One of the reasons I got into drawing cartoons on the back of business cards was I could carry them around with me. Living downtown, you spend a lot of time walking around the place. I wanted an art form that was perfect for that.

So if I was walking down the street and I suddenly got hit with the itch to draw something, I could just nip over to the nearest park bench or coffee shop, pull out a blank card from my bag and get busy doing my thing. Seamless. Effortless. No fuss. I like it.

Before, when I was doing larger works, every time I got an idea while walking down the street I'd have to quit what I was doing and schlep back to my studio while the inspiration was still buzzing around in my head. Nine times out of ten the inspired moment would have passed by the time I got back, rendering the whole exercise futile. Sure, I'd get drawing anyway, but it always seemed I was drawing a memory, not something happening at that very moment.

If you're arranging your life in such a way that you need to make a lot of fuss between feeling the itch and getting to work, you're putting the cart before the horse. You're probably creating a lot of counterproductive "Me, The Artist, I must create, I must leave something to posterity" melodrama. Not interesting for you or for anyone else.



You have to find a way of working that makes it dead easy to take full advantage of your inspired moments. They never hit at a convenient time, nor do they last long.

Conversely, neither should you fret too much about “writer’s block,” “artist’s block,” or whatever. If you’re looking at a blank piece of paper and nothing comes to you, then go do something else. Writer’s block is just a symptom of feeling like you have nothing to say, combined with the rather weird idea that you SHOULD feel the need to say something.

Why? If you have something to say, then say it. If not, enjoy the silence while it lasts. The noise will return soon enough. In the meantime, you’re better off going out into the big, wide world, having some adventures, and refilling your well. Trying to create when you don’t feel like it is like making conversation for the sake of making conversation. It’s not really connecting, it’s just droning on like an old, drunken barfly.

25.

You have to find your own shtick.

A Picasso always looks like Picasso painted it. Hemingway always sounds like Hemingway. A Beethoven Symphony always sounds like a Beethoven’s Symphony. Part of being a Master is learning how to sing in nobody else’s voice but your own.



Every artist is looking for their big, definitive “Ah-Ha!” moment, whether they’re a Master or not.

That moment where they finally find their true voice, once and for all.

For me, it was when I discovered drawing on the back of business cards.

Other, more famous and notable examples would be Jackson Pollack discovering splatter paint. Or Robert Ryman discovering all-white canvases. Andy Warhol discovering silkscreen. Hunter S. Thompson discovering Gonzo Journalism. Duchamp discovering the Found Object. Jasper Johns discovering the American Flag. Hemingway discovering brevity. James Joyce discovering stream-of-consciousness prose.

Every artist is looking for their big, definitive
“Ah-Ha!” moment, whether they’re a Master or not.

Was it luck? Perhaps a little bit.

But it wasn’t the format that made the art great. It was the fact that somehow while playing around with something new, suddenly they found themselves able to put their entire selves into it.

Only then did it become their ‘shtick,’ their true voice, etc.

That’s what people responded to. The humanity, not the form. The voice, not the form.

Put your whole self into it, and you will find your true voice. Hold back and you won’t. It’s that simple.

26.

Write from the heart.

There is no silver bullet. There is only the love God gave you.

As a professional writer, I am interested in how conversation scales.

How communication scales, x to the power of n etc etc.

Ideally, if you're in the communication business, you want to say the same thing, the same way to an audience of millions that you would to an audience of one. Imagine the power you'd have if you could pull it off.

But sadly, it doesn't work that way.

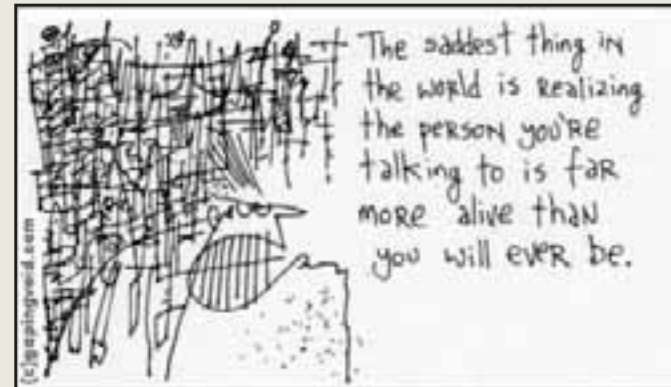
You can't love a crowd the same way you can love a person.

And a crowd can't love you the way a single person can love you.

Intimacy doesn't scale. Not really. Intimacy is a one-on-one phenomenon.

It's not a big deal. Whether you're writing to an audience of one, five, a thousand, a million, ten million, there's really only one way to really connect. One way that actually works:

Write from the heart.



info

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hugh MacLeod is a brand consultant, copywriter and cartoonist. Born in America but educated in the UK, he has spent most of his life shuttling between the two countries.

He started out in straight TV advertising writing in the early 90s but with the advent of new media it evolved into new brand thinking and cultural transformation.

His website, <http://gapingvoid.com>, is widely read in the blogosphere.

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