

TRY 101: THE MANIFESTO

SAYING YES TO A LIFE OF EFFORT AND EXPERIMENTATION

Part I

Opening Salvo: Who I Am and How I Got Here

I.

Introduction

I'm TJ. I am a writer and a teacher and an editor (among other things). I have a few degrees: one in Creative Writing and two in English. Which is to say: I was one of those people who just keeps going to school, collecting professionally untenable credentials (along with a fair amount of student loan debt), with little or no sign of getting off the carousel. Not necessarily every parent's worst nightmare but certainly not every parent's dream, either.

Still, contrary to what my own parents expected throughout their son's lost/over-educated decade of the 1990s, I am now happily, gainfully employed (have been for two decades and counting) using this (admittedly) rather singular set of skills, predilections, and (for lack of a better word) training.

Where I Work and What I Do

I work in a musty cinderblock building, mere spitting distance from a stretch of interstate that locals call "Malfunction Junction." It's a serpentine half-mile of eight-lane highway so dangerous that the governor, harboring vague hopes of saving a life or two, lowered its speed limit to an embargo-era crawl of 50 MPH. Eighteen-wheelers trundle by on the overpass outside my classroom, and I can all but feel the concrete stanchions wiggle with the weight of it all.

Still, there is no denying that this exact spot is crucial to the entire state. Here, east meets west and north meets south. To get most anywhere worth getting to in these parts, you've got to navigate your way through this one seminal spot.

I say all that to say this: Working *where* I do—at a dangerous, wobbly, but ultimately vital crossroads—shares some symbolic kinship with *what* I do:

(Drum roll, please.)

I teach creative writing at a magnet school for the arts.

Okay. I confess: I am being a little too grave and dramatic—on purpose. Hence the whole "musty cinderblock" opener, the references to spit and traffic fatalities,

the implication that the work I do is somehow perilous. That's mainly just to throw other creative-writing careerists¹ off my scent.

¹ Yes: there is such a thing as a creative-writing careerist. For better and for worse, I'm one of them. That's a confession. (Father forgive me for I have sinned.) Anyway. More on this to come in later sections.

My job is a best-kept secret in this already rarefied field. It is, in fact, one of the best creative writing jobs around. Anywhere. I am very, very lucky to have it. Please don't take it from me. (Thank you.) And, yes, probably Mark Doty² and other such creative-class "academics" have it better: smaller teaching loads, more money, more notoriety, more robust book sales. Etc.

² Mark Doty is a very accomplished, talented contemporary American poet who, like the lion's share of very accomplished, talented contemporary American poets, makes his living by teaching in universities. He is important. In certain circles. As of this writing, Mark Doty has not won a Pulitzer Prize or a National Book Award, but someday maybe he will. It's okay if you have no idea who he is. Nobody knows poets.

But pound-for-pound, when it comes to just about every meaningful metric, my job holds up very well in comparison to those of many of my MFA classmates. Some of my peers are out of academia altogether, mostly by choice. One hauled fuel for Halliburton in Iraq in the late 1990s. This was back when they were *beheading people* for hauling fuel for Halliburton in Iraq. Another is an analyst for a clandestine government organization. Still others went to more likely dark sides: law school (the trucker in Iraq eventually did this, too, proving only that he's a glutton for punishment), corporate communications, commercial editing, web design and development. Etc and so on.

Many of those who *do* have jobs as writing teachers share a familiar story: non-tenure track jobs (think: seasonal contract work, not unlike migrant farm workers) rife with too much work, too little pay, and an overabundance of thanklessness. There is a small minority who have reached stations far better than that—health insurance, fast-tracks to tenure, livable wages, even book publications—but I still cannot say I would switch *classrooms* with any of them. Most of them teach more courses than I do, and with one or two exceptions, all of them are required to teach things besides creative writing to students whose skill levels are widely divergent and, more important, whose commitment to writing, to reading, to language in general is often ambivalent at best.

The School You Wish You Went To

I believe the best kinds of teaching and learning are themselves creative acts, regardless of the subject or setting. They can be, anyway. And, as such, some of the most vital kinds of teaching and learning can (maybe even *should*) be more erratic and mysterious than we like to let on. And this isn't just a problem in higher education. Mainstream, conventional schools—at least those in the United States—are good at some kinds of teaching and learning. They tend to not be so good at these messier kinds of teaching and learning. And that's not just a problem for current students. Conventional schools haven't been very good at teaching us to access what I call the Creative Spirit for a long time. Honestly, there's a good chance they've never been good at it. But that makes sense. That's not why they were invented in the first place.

Enter (or re-enter, I guess) my great good fortune as a teacher. I'm going to take some time to tell you about it in a little more detail because this is really a manifesto about the relationship between teaching, learning, and creativity, and maybe *most essentially* it's about the intricate and vital relationship between how we teach *ourselves* to be creative people and how our environment helps (or hinders) us in that pursuit.

My professional life, as a teacher in an arts magnet school, has put me in a unique position to observe, year after year, a lot of talented, creative people (my teenaged students, my adult colleagues, visiting artists of all kinds) who engage themselves in that very process: teaching themselves to be creative people, allowing their environment (primarily their peers and mentors) to influence them. Usually for better, but, yes, sometimes for worse. I really do believe those—these; *my*—observations can help anyone, of any age or background, who wants to engage in that sort of process themselves.³

³ More often than not, when I tell people where I work and what I do, a wide-eyed look comes over their faces—equal parts wistful and incredulous—followed by them saying, “Man. I wish I had gone to a school like that.” Could be they mean they wish they'd gone to a school where everybody wears ripped jeans and spiky dog collars to school and listens to The Smiths all day (there's actually somewhat less of that than you might think, at least where I teach). I think it's not just that, though. As I implied above, I think there's a significant number of smart, creative people who the conventional model of teaching, learning, and human development profoundly neglects. That neglect doesn't just end upon graduation, either. It lasts. Those smart, creative people internalize it, take for granted that their creative impulses are [FILL IN THE BLANK: frivolous, selfish, weird, not good enough...]. My sense is that a lot of those

people still want “to engage in that sort of process themselves,” maybe even more desperately than they would care to admit. They just don’t know how—or where, or (gulp) *why*—to start. I hope this manifesto can help them find answers to some of those questions.

So here goes: I cannot speak to anyone else’s experience teaching in a magnet school for the arts. I have not done it anywhere else, and I can’t say for sure that I would want to. What I can say for sure is that I get to teach creative writing—and *only* creative writing—to preternaturally smart, talented students who, by and large, want to be even better writers than they already are. I have a great deal of autonomy in the classroom, both day-to-day and in the overarching design of my courses, and the school’s administration is supportive of my department as a whole. Success in my own writing life is met with a collegial hip-hip-hooray, complete with hugs and/or pats on the back at the proverbial water cooler, but I am as far away from any publish-or-perish system as you could possibly imagine.

The school itself was established in 1972. In the ensuing half-century, it has been a consistent source of pride for a Deep South state where such things—consistency, pride—have too often been anomalies in public education. Though admission is competitive, the school is public and tuition-free for state residents. It serves grades seven through twelve, and its scope is statewide, so students who don’t live within commuting distance—some of them as young as twelve or thirteen—live in dormitories on campus. It’s also not unusual for students to undertake round-trip daily commutes of one hundred miles or more to engage in up to three hours each day of rigorous, intensive study in one of six specialties: Creative Writing, Dance, Math & Science, Music, Theatre Arts, or Visual Art. That’s *in addition* to the school’s full day of academic core courses, most of which are taught at accelerated prep school levels. The regular school day starts before 8:00 a.m. and runs to at least 4:40 p.m. Performing arts students often stay much later than that for rehearsals. Our graduates end up at some of the most prestigious colleges, universities, and conservatories in the nation—Yale, Princeton, the University of Chicago; Julliard, RISD, Cooper Union; etc.—and, each year, our tiny graduating classes of 60 to 70 students routinely garner total scholarship offers in excess of \$7 million.

All of that hints at what makes my teaching experience unique. Boiled down to essentials, what more could any teacher ask for? As a rule, these exceptionally talented students want to be here, and they (often their families, too) are willing to make great sacrifices so that they can have an exceptional learning experience.

One recent creative writing student's father turned down a substantial promotion at work because it would've meant pulling his daughter from the school and moving to Texas. Confronted with a similar situation, another student moved in with her grandparents instead of following along with the rest of her immediate family when her mother's career called them off to another part of the state. "We knew we had to figure out how I would stay," she said. "It's so integral to my life. This school just becomes your world."

I mean. Wow, right?

Is it perfect? Certainly not. This is where the aforementioned intersection of "dangerous, wobbly, but ultimately vital" really does come in. First of all, the intensity of the experience is very different from that of most educational environments, even those of a lot of colleges and universities. I spend three hours a day, five days a week with largely the same students. They can attend the school—*specializing in the same department*—for as many as *six years*. Exhaustion—physical, intellectual, and interpersonal—is nearly constant. For everybody: students, parents, faculty, and administrators alike. Students either grind away for years on end at high RPMs, or they become adept at keeping their heads just above water, doing *just enough* of what's asked of them to stay in good academic standing.

The latter can be frustrating, for sure. All of our Creative Writing students, for example, have extraordinary potential—innate facility with language, powers of observation and maturity of thought that belie their years—and to see someone consistently demure in the face of that potential is a bit of a downer.

It's no more of a downer, however, than the problem on the flipside. Many of our students, the high-RPM grinders, develop an almost pathological need to stay busy. "I never really know what to do when I have down time," is an all-too-common refrain. From my perspective as a writing teacher, I worry how that undermines a young writer's need to ponder, cogitate, ruminate. Of her *own* volition (not in the context of a class). In my experience, writing doesn't just *require* meditative reflection—it *is* a meditative reflection. If someone doesn't know how to pause, check out of the workaday world, and resist the pervasive thrum of activity, I'm not completely convinced that he actually knows how to write—not to his full potential, anyway.

There's also a more practical too-much-too-soon factor. Writing students who have been immersed in an intensive workshop experience—"It becomes your world"—before ever setting foot on a university campus are in danger of encountering a precarious dilemma in college. They have often developed a writing process that relies (too) heavily on workshops (i.e., immediate feedback from others) to produce and revise new work—a pretty big problem in itself—only to find lower-level undergraduate creative writing classes "beneath" them. Admittedly, that sentiment may be rooted in arrogance, but the change in environment can be profound.

To quote Martone again, "creative writing" is not a subject matter—but that which passes for creative writing subject matter (show don't tell, use sensory detail, not all poems rhyme, avoid clichés, yadda, yadda) tends to be the bailiwick of intro-level college creative writing classes. Faced with what they see as water-treading review and a group of peers who don't share their background or expectations from a writing class, more than a few of our students have decided to let their writing lives wither on the vine while they're in college. They may or may not pick it up again at a later date—but when a writing (or any creative) life withers, it tends to *really* wither.

So, no, the work I do is not without pitfalls, practical and theoretical, and I am not without my own questions about the aims and/or ultimate value of our project. Namely, are we supposed to be grooming our students to take a prominent place among the next generation's writers of note? And, if so, how are we doing on that score? From a sheer numbers perspective, not *great* (but getting better). While a handful of our former students are still writing and publishing their work, the vast majority of our department's graduates are not published writers. Anecdotally, my sense is that a large percentage of them (perhaps a large *majority* of them) aren't even actively writing anymore.

In fairness, writing is a longitudinal pursuit—to wit, for a long time, the folks at the Yale Series of Younger Poets considered anyone under forty as "younger." That would cover the large majority of our graduates. And our program has made some evolutionary leaps in the last twenty years, both in terms of curriculum and in number of graduates, so we have high hopes that it's only a matter of time before a representative sample of ASFA creative writing alums take their respective places in the contemporary literary firmament. Time will tell, I suppose, but there are some encouraging signs as of this writing.

Regardless of time's ultimate verdict on that front, I do think we're successful in doing something a lot more important than populating the contemporary literary firmament, and maybe even more lasting.

Tapping Into the Power of Environments

Malcolm Gladwell, bestselling author of *Outliers*, *Tipping Point* and *Blink*, was asked a while back why he thinks some people live up to their potential and others don't. For him, it boiled down to what he called "the redemptive power of environments." He went on to say:

My point is it's almost impossible to know where the person ends and their environment begins, and the longer someone is in a particular environment the blurrier that line gets. More specifically, you can't make definitive judgments about the personal characteristics of people who come from structured environments. What does it mean to say that a Marine is brave? It might mean that a Marine is an inherently brave person. It may also be that the culture of the Marine Corps is so powerful, and the training so intensive, and the supporting pressure of other Marines so empowering, that even a coward would behave bravely in that context.⁴

⁴ Simmons, Bill. "Curious Guy: Malcolm Gladwell." Page 2. ESPN.com. 2 Mar. 2006.
<http://es.pn/dgF3>

If nothing else, I can say this with confidence: I know my colleagues and I help our students create a definitive environment. And through immersing themselves in that environment, our students do develop a particular identity. Perhaps it's a particularly *peculiar* identity, but so be it. For better or for worse, our students feel like they have been a part of something unique. If that helps them transcend the ordinary from here on out, to think in new and provocative ways about a range of subjects and experiences, then, yes, that's something redemptive. And helping other people to do that is a life's work I can, in good conscience, embrace.

Tapping Into an Even Higher Power

But there's another crucial kind of work we're engaged in at the school where I teach. It's actually a lot harder than the work of creating a definitively unique

environment, and we're far from proficient at it, but I think that's because failure is an integral part of this kind of work. This work, in fact, has everything to do with an individual creative person's relationship to the very ideas of proficiency and failure in the first place.

One day, not long after I started teaching at the school, I made a very rudimentary poster to put up in my classroom. I don't remember the circumstances, exactly, nor the exact timeframe—was it in my first year? My second? Can't be sure. What I remember is confronting a consistent, low-level hum of passive resistance in a lot of my students. It wasn't so much resistance to me or what I was teaching (I don't think) or even a resistance to writing in general. It was more a resistance to fully embracing themselves as exceptional people whose creative potential was only limited by their willingness (A) to truly devote themselves to discovering a lasting, individual creative *process*, as messy and indeterminate as that might be (as opposed to the one-off, late-night alchemy of writing, by hook or by white-knuckled crook, individual works their peers might admire in a workshop), (B) to have real, enduring faith in their creative impulses and instincts, yet, (C) to resist the idea that they had mastered anything at all and, thereby, (D) to remain open to new possibilities, new ideas, new forms, even new versions of themselves, not only as artists but as human beings.

Yes, these were people who had been told, at a very young age, that they were really, really good at something. Everyone agreed: they had all the talent in the world. And yet, somehow, with too many of them, I had this nagging feeling that some important part of the process was missing.

So I made a poster.

My poster was simple. Three letters, one word, on a mustard-colored piece of ordinary 8 1/2 x 11. It faded over the years. When it fell off the wall—it fell a lot; stuff doesn't stay stuck to musty cinderblock—I taped it back up.

It said: "Try."

As is often the case, the more experience you have, the more you realize you still don't (and won't ever) know nearly as much as you thought you did when you started out. In the last two decades (less or more), I've had a lot of theories and systems when it comes to teaching and learning and being creative, and all of

them have had pretty short shelf-lives, or else I've discovered major caveats that render them all but obsolete in most cases. But that one-word sign gets truer and more universal every year. Not just for the teachers and students at my school but for all the creative people I know and love.

Try.

That's it. It's a shorthand, of course. It stands for a lot of things. It isn't always *easy* to try. Most of the time, it's pretty difficult. But my three decades of study and teaching have taught me it's the very essence of the Creative Spirit. Which is to say: It's the essence of something larger than just writing or art or making something cool for other people to enjoy. This word and the attitude it represents is, I believe, the only way we discover—and then celebrate—the better versions of ourselves.

II.

We're trying to show people we're alive and that's about it. I wish that was enough.

—Mike Watt, the Minutemen

I was once in an intense conversation with someone I was hoping to impress. We were talking about writing. She was not a writer and she wanted to understand why I write. "Why do you have to write for a bunch of strangers?" she asked. "What if you just wrote something for your son or daughter or someone you really loved and no one else got to read it? Would that be enough?"

This was several years ago, and the role of writing in my life was somewhat different than it is now. I hadn't published a book yet, and I *really* wanted to publish a book—I'd been working towards that goal for well over a decade by then. Like many lightly published or unpublished writers, I had the vague notion that publishing a book would change my life significantly. At the very least, I was sure it would change people's perception of me as a writer (for the better, of course), and that, in turn, would give me a stronger sense of identity: I'm a writer; I've published a book. A book that people liked.

I can't remember my exact response to the woman's question, but I do remember it didn't impress her very much. I did go on to publish a book, and then I published another book. And another and another and...

But nothing really happened. There were some minor perks: I got a smattering of gratifying reviews in a few small on-line publications, and I met a few strangers who'd read my work and enjoyed it. I signed a few books, gave a few readings. It was better than a kick in the head, for sure, but there was no sea change in my sense of identity. I was still the same person with the same set of insecurities and doubts, the same laundry list of shortcomings and misdeeds. If anything, I'd added some insecurities and doubts to the baggage I was already lugging around: namely, is this the high-water mark, the best I can do? Is this what I've been working for? And tell me again: why do I insist on spitting into this headwind? Which is to say: I'd found my way back to the woman's question. And the essentialness of it: it's not just about why I write but who I am writing *to*.

In truth, the woman's question had never really left me. Though I didn't know it at the time, it was a question I'd been waiting a long time to be asked. Like all such questions, it immediately and steadily wormed its way further and further into my creative consciousness. Very shortly after our conversation, I had an idea for a new writing project, and while I knew on some level that it had arisen from my conversation with the woman, I didn't know much else about it. Maybe it was fiction, maybe it was nonfiction; maybe it was short, maybe it was long. Maybe I'd serialize it on my blog. Maybe I'd try to publish it in print. The only thing I knew for sure was the title: "Notes to a Son in a Parallel Universe."

Appropriately enough, I started making notes for the Notes. I romanticized this imaginary son. I really believed he needed me, my wisdom, my unique insights into the world at large. In writing these notes for him, I was going to write him into existence, and in so doing I was going to write something universally accessible, something that resonated with, well, the world at large. Or at least the 100,000 people it takes to have a bestseller.

One curious thing, though, is that I quickly realized I'd already tried to write similar things before. In fact, most of the books I would eventually publish have significant portions in them that are nearly exact facsimiles of this project. In one, there's an elegy to an unborn son and a story about an old man leading a young man on a picaresque journey toward enlightenment; in another, I had a character write a "book of revelation" to a boy he had reason to believe (though no firm

confirmation) was his son. I liked that idea so much, I did it again in yet another book. Clearly this was an archetypal project for me. Its roots ran—still run—deep.

But probably the *most* curious thing about this “new project” was that, despite its working title, I still wasn’t writing *to* this “son,” or even for him. I was writing *about* him, for strangers. That realization took a while to dawn on me. Gertrude Stein rather famously said, “I write for myself and strangers.” Like most writers, I could identify with that statement for a long time. It even seemed sort of profound, a paradoxical riddle that hints at the limitations of a dualistic worldview. Self and Other are, on some level, one and the same.

But the woman’s question about audience cast Stein’s statement in a new light. The motivation behind writing for yourself and strangers isn’t about breaking down dualism. It’s mostly about ego, about creating a sense of self outside yourself. Without the messy business of directly interacting with other people. That’s all the strangers are for in Stein’s equation: external validation of self. At least that’s how I now understand it, and this was the exact motivation that led me to believe—mistakenly—that publishing a book would change my life.

When asked why his band, the Minutemen, did what they did, Mike Watt said, “We’re trying to show people we’re alive and that’s about it. I wish that was enough.” I think that is enough. Now I do, anyway. I think it has to be, or nothing worth making would ever get made. I also think the question of whether or not it’s enough has a lot to do with who you want to show that you’re alive. Again: it took me a while—there was no *aha* moment of discovery—but over time I came to understand the crucial element of my archetypal project about sons. The “son” who’d been calling out to me, from the other side of something, who wanted my insights and wisdom, who wanted my reassurance and unconditional love, who wanted more than anything to know me—all along, this “son” was me.

Earlier, I said that the role of writing in my life has changed. Here’s how:

Now I’m writing to teach myself.

Now I’m writing to wake up.

Now I’m writing to break myself open.

Now I’m writing to open my heart as wide as it will go.

Now I’m writing to show myself that I’m alive.

Is that enough? It has to be.

III.

I am the messiah. I am the messiah. Yes I think you heard me right. I am the messiah. I was gonna wait till next year, build up the suspense a little. But I could not resist. It's like when you got a really big secret, you're just bursting to tell someone. It was sorta like that with this. And now that I've told you, I feel this great weight lifted. Dr. Nusbaum was right. He's my therapist. He said get it out in the open.

—Dan Bern, "Jerusalem"

C. S. Lewis wrote an essay on forgiveness, how important it is, but also how difficult. He said if we're going to learn how to forgive people, it's probably best not to start with the Gestapo. Start instead with people you love. I wonder if we need to start even closer to home than that.

To paraphrase the Dan Bern song: it's sorta like that with this. Messiah or not, saving yourself—if by "saving yourself" we can agree to mean awakening yourself, opening your heart as wide as it will go—is hard. It's scary. It might make you sad. It requires forgiveness, reassurance, and as much unconditional love as you can muster. It requires you to accommodate yourself, and to accommodate yourself, you really have to know and accept yourself—which can also sometimes be a little scary and sad. I, for one, find it's much easier to forgive and reassure and love and accommodate and know and accept other people than it is to do those things for myself. Not that I'm the Gestapo or anything, but it's easier to start elsewhere.

That's dicey too, though. One of my students once wrote about this, in a poem called "wishlist" that ends this way: "I want to tell you I am fine where I am, and that you should never try to save me from myself." Yes. She's right. The only way to "save" other people is to try to save yourself.

Epiphany: The MoMA Moment

Circa 2011, a time when I myself really needed saving (though I didn't quite know it then), I found myself (note: double meaning intended) in the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. It was the first time I'd been to MoMA, and I was especially excited to see a Jackson Pollock canvas up close. I was especially excited to be visiting New York, too; New York is, well, *especially exciting*. To add

to my excitement, later that day, I was going to visit my friend Sunil, who I rarely see, and then that night I was going to hear two of my favorite musicians in concert at the Beacon Theatre. Though it was *scorching* hot outside, there was an air of Christmas morning to all of it for me. An embarrassment of riches. The breathlessness, the giddiness of a happy, expectant, carefree boy with a perfect day in front of him.

The only thing was, I couldn't *find* the Pollock painting. MoMA's a big place and even though I was on the right floor, I found myself wandering through gallery after gallery—yes, yes, Jasper Johns, Sol LeWitt, etc, etc. But no Pollock. This increasingly frustrating pursuit soon took on the trappings of a sacred pilgrimage—perhaps even a crusade. For some reason, I needed to see the Pollock *first*, so I wasn't really looking at anything else. I circled back, retraced my steps, asked a docent. Wandered some more. I wanted the painting to appear, to reveal itself. I wanted it to make a grand entrance into my life, and I wanted to be awed. Could I be looking for anything more obvious than a Jackson Pollock painting upon first setting foot on the fourth floor of MoMA? And yet I had blinders on, very unimaginative blinders.

Lucky for me, the universe intervened to teach me something I haven't forgotten. As it happens, I snapped out of my blind search for the strangely elusive Pollock just in time to see one of the musicians I was going to hear (Lisa Hannigan, who as opening for Glen Hansard) at the Beacon Theatre that night. We walked right by each other in the gallery immediately adjacent to the one where Pollock's immense canvas occupied one whole wall.

The NPR radio show *This American Life* has a whole episode on coincidences and serendipity, and mostly the takeaway is this: they're just coincidences. They usually don't mean anything. It's extraordinarily easy to make too much of them. I think yes and no. If we're to take them too literally, then yes we run the very real risk of overestimating their significance. *Rarely* is it a good idea to significantly alter our lives—or even to take any real, specific, immediate action—in direct response to a single strange happenstance, however magical or compelling it feels at the time.

But then (fittingly enough) there's the abstract expressionism of dreams. Figurative truths, ones that resist classification, that reveal themselves only slowly and partly, that expand and evolve over time—I believe it's difficult to overestimate what *they* can mean to someone. At least someone who's any kind

of artist. The workaday world is full of these sorts of dream-induced awakenings, if only we'll take the blinders off.

It might go without saying, but I was utterly flummoxed by my brief encounter with Lisa Hannigan at MoMA. It wasn't really in a "celebrity sighting" sort of way, though. It had more to do with my frame of mind (this quasi-spiritual search for a famous work of art), that it happened in MoMA of all places, that it felt so utterly unexpected and yet also so fitting. I did manage to say hello to her and tell her how much I enjoy her music, but my head was spinning with all this unexpected abstract expressionism. Not only that, I didn't want to bother her, so I quickly stammered my admiration and left her to her own wanderings, which seemed a lot less blind than mine.

I *did* find the Pollock. While I was glad to see it, and it *is* impressive, it was no longer the most important thing to reveal itself to me that day at MoMA. Though it wasn't Christmas, I *had* received a gift, a gift of the creative spirit. Like most such gifts, this one came exquisitely and tightly wrapped. It has taken some time and energy to get it completely open. Or anyway: open enough to begin to suss out what it might mean.

What It Might Mean

I am enamored of Lewis Hyde's book, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. It's a book with a lot of moving parts, but the big takeaway is that art works best—it truly performs its social and spiritual function—in a gift exchange, as opposed to a market exchange. I give you this poem, this song, this amulet I've made, and you—the recipient—are *gifted*. Then, in time, you give what you've been given to someone else. The made thing isn't a commodity that belongs to anyone—it gets passed around, shared. The emphasis is on the giving, the sharing—on being gifted and therefore belonging to the community of givers.

Music does this somewhat better than other forms of art in the modern age. The cover song is alive and well, and it's a kind of gift, an homage, an ancient form of communion, really. And, earbuds notwithstanding, we still have more opportunities to experience music in communion with others. As a writer, such opportunities feel few and far between to me. Perhaps that's why teaching has taken hold of my imagination more and more over time. It's clearly a communal,

symbiotic effort, and the gift exchange aspect of it is unmistakable, immediate, and very gratifying.

When I encountered one of my favorite musicians at MoMA, I was in the throes of a desperate ambition that had absolutely nothing to do with “creative communion.” The blind search for the Pollock was tantamount to my (even blinder) search for the holy grail of literary “success.” In the midst of that crusade-like pursuit, as I searched for a treasured creative commodity and instead found a brief but (for me) charged human moment with a living, breathing human being whose life’s work has gifted me, I was shocked awake.

When I was first trying to make some sense of that moment, the only thing I could think of was (oddly enough) a scene in *Jaws*, where Chief Brody is shoveling chum into the water, trying to bait the shark. Out of nowhere, the great fish reveals itself, and Brody backs away muttering to no one in particular, “You’re gonna need a bigger boat.” That’s an awkward allusion; it seems to make Lisa Hannigan the shark. But sharks are cool: necessary, perfect expressions of their kind. Plus I really don’t think she—a woman in the 21st century called Lisa Hannigan—is, in fact, the shark. The shark is the epiphany, the moment itself, and what Hannigan came to represent. All of that, in its entirety.

For a long time, I didn’t exactly know what it meant for me to need a bigger boat—but I immediately and intuitively knew it meant something very important. It was an insight I couldn’t have come to on my own. I needed to see the shark. To be startled, frightened even, out of myself.

I’ve come to believe my MoMA epiphany means that desperate ambition and creative commodities aren’t the right vessel for me. I think teaching is the right vessel. I think writing to show myself (and other people) that I’m alive is the right vessel. I think belonging to and celebrating the community of givers is the right vessel. I have been making slow, sometimes unsteady progress toward that kind of teaching, writing, and belonging. That’s what this book is: an ode to unsteady progress, yours and mine alike.

Part II
Why Try?

CHAPTER 1

What It Means to Try (And Why It's Sometimes Hard)

Try = Effort + Experimentation

Anne Lamott says all prayers boil down to three words: "Please" and "Thank you." Those three words are so loaded, so essential, so full of grace, spirit, vulnerability. All the rest is just window dressing. I think making stuff worth making boils down to just one such word: "Try." Try is such an important word because it implies both *effort* and *experimentation*, both of which are absolutely necessary for any authentic expression of the Creative Spirit. In fact, I've come to believe those two things are pretty much all you need.

"Try hard."

"Try it and see what happens."

Easier said than done. "Try," defined this way, means saying yes a lot more than some of us are used to saying it.

Yes, I will make an effort.

Yes, I will be open to this experience.

Yes, I want to do a *Thing*. A Thing that Really Matters, to me if no one else.

Yes, I may not be able to do it, and, yes, I'm going to try to do it anyway.

Your "yeses" define you and your creative process.

Try = Fail + Try Again

Here's why trying is difficult: even when you "try hard," when you "try it and see what happens," sometimes—often, actually—what happens is you fail.

I've failed. A lot. Let me count just some of the ways:

(A) I failed at a marriage.

That made feel bad about myself for a long time, even though it happened in my twenties and I wasn't married for very long. Part of my sadness was rooted in a

bad habit of romanticizing romantic loss. Come to find out, that's a habit that can very easily breed more such failures and—surprise, surprise—more such sadness. I'll have more to say about this pattern as it relates to creativity in the coming sections regarding fear, sadness, and cynicism.

But I think most of that sadness was rooted in the fact that, when I was a little kid, I wanted to do the following four things when I grew up:

- (1) play pro football,
- (2) teach fourth grade,
- (3) write stories, and, because my family didn't seem to be like all the other families...
- (4) more than anything else, I wanted to be a good, normal husband and a good, normal dad.

Turns out (2) and (3) have pretty much happened, give or take. (☺: *Yay!*). I put in the necessary effort and experimentation—I failed and, to paraphrase Samuel Beckett, I responded to those failures with somewhat better failures—and here I am: teaching and writing. On the other hand, (1) was a predictable bust, and by the time I turned 30, (4) crashed and burned too. (☹: *Boooo!*)

Looking back, it's obvious that I never really tried to be a professional football player—I quit playing football in my sophomore year of high school, and even then I never played for the high school team; I just played county youth league. In other words: I half-assed it for a little while, and then gave up—content to wallow in nostalgia, intramural fantasies, and far too many fall Saturdays and Sundays watching other people do what I had dreamed of doing as a little kid.

More important, it's just as obvious to me now that I never made much of an effort at my first marriage either. It took me a long time to realize that, though. For the longest time, I really thought I had made the effort, I thought I had said "yes" to the experience of being married, that this marriage really mattered to me. But I hadn't—I liked the *idea* of being married, the image of it, not the everyday reality—and so it didn't. Not really. And so, predictably, it (I) failed.

(B) I *sucked* at my first real job, too.

Well, actually: I even sucked at my first "What next?" after-college job—like the stereotypical recent graduate with an English degree, I waited tables for eight

months before I decided to go to grad school. I was the type of waiter who, though he theoretically *survived* on tips, hoped the restaurant wouldn't be busy so he wouldn't actually have to wait tables. I spilled things on people, couldn't figure out how to open a wine bottle with one of those pocket-sized cork screws, brought the wrong food to the wrong tables. I was a mess.

But then I *also* sucked at my first "career-oriented" job after I (finally) finished grad school. I edited a quarterly popular history magazine, and I was (somehow) simultaneously bored out of my mind and in over my head. Like my stint as a waiter, I didn't know how to do the job well, and I didn't *want* to know how to do it well. I promise you: this is, without a doubt, the worst combination for any potential career path. If that's how you feel about your job, do whatever you have to do to get out of it as soon as you can.

(C) I've written a lot of failed poems, stories, essays, blog posts, Facebook statuses, Tweets, etc. I've written two whole failed novel manuscripts, a failed memoir, and parts of at least three failed screenplays. Etc, etc, etc. And let's not even get started on my considerable failures as a teacher, a profession that requires a constant (and very often clumsy) *pas de deux* between what you think you're trying to do and what actually happens. Failing better is, after all, still failing. The only thing I can say in my defense, on all counts, is that I keep trying. For better or for worse.

Let's pause for a moment. Because you may be wondering: "What's with the TMI?"

Maybe, like a lot of us creative types, I'm a bit of an exhibitionist. But it's not *just* that. I'm also trying to put my money where my mouth is. That is, I have come to understand, from experience and observation, that we can't separate the experiences of our Mind-Body-Spirit from our creative process—and, therefore, what that process produces. The minute you try to create something—even *before* that, when you allow yourself to identify as a creative person—you invite all kinds of baggage into the room. Yours, of course, and, strangely enough, other people's too (more on this when we get to the stuff about cynicism later in this section). Mental and emotional baggage, interpersonal baggage, spiritual baggage, sometimes even physical baggage.

Failure isn't productive if it doesn't matter to you, and if it matters to you, it matters to *all of you*. So failing in a creative endeavor is, in fact, within the same

family of hurts as failing in a relationship or a job or anything else that you really don't want to fail at. It cuts to the essential core of who you are as a human being. Your hopes, dreams, and fears. It cuts to the core of your own self-worth and your sense of how others perceive you.

That's why failure's hard, even if it's "just" a bout of writer's block or a pesky story or poem you can't seem to figure out how to improve. Even if it's "just" a bad review or "just" another rejection notice. But that's also why productive failure is invaluable to your growth as an artist and as a human being. It teaches you what really matters to you. And if it matters to you—if it matters to *all of you*—then it's damn sure worth trying again.

The good news is, productive failure doesn't usually kill you. It's a part of the game. Going through life trying not to fail in any meaningful way is a little bit like being in a food fight and trying not to get any food on you. The only way to do it is to go stand in a corner and hope nobody notices you. It's much more fun to grab a handful of mashed potatoes or a greasy slab of Salisbury steak and charge into the fray.

Oh, and one last funny thing about failure: if you just go on living your life, stumbling along, eventually the failures of the past don't really feel as much like failures anymore. No, I didn't play professional football, and, no, I never learned how to be a good waiter. And, while I've achieved some moderate "success" as a writer, I certainly can't quit my day job. Luckily, over time, my stance toward all those things has changed substantially.

First and foremost, I now sincerely believe *everybody* should have to wait tables for at least six months. In order to vote. And eat in restaurants. And maybe even to procreate. Like some countries make young people serve in the military, we should conscript young people into the service industry. It's an invaluable crash course in just about all facets of human nature. Not least humility. And, I mean, obviously I didn't choose the right body to play football past little league, so that was always a non-starter. And thank god: I would've been killed. At least maimed.

And my life as a writer—all those failed writing projects punctuated by brief moments of pyrrhic victory (if ~~a tree falls in the woods~~ writer publishes a book and nobody reads it, does it make a sound)? They've helped me develop a creative process that (more often than not) works for me, a process that has produced some work I like, that more or less says what I meant to say. More

important, the unanticipated value of my failed writing projects is that they have informed my teaching immensely. They've made me more humble (there's that word again), more compassionate, more open, more confident in what people can create and what they can overcome. And, though I couldn't have predicted it when I was a kid or even as a young adult, it turns out teaching is most likely what I was preparing for all along.

Which leads me, finally, to what I considered my most personal failure for so long: the fact that I wasn't a "good normal husband and a good normal dad." I can't say for sure—you'd have to ask my wife and my son, both of whom I love more than I can put down in words—but I think "good" and "normal" aren't the right descriptors when it comes to our most vital creative acts. And all good relationships, I now understand, are creative acts. Effort (the *right* and truly loving kind), yes, plus experimentation.

So. Yes. All my so-called failures—personal and professional, big and small—have led me here, to meaningful work and people I love. Along the way, they've broken me open, slowly but surely. For the better. In the process, they've helped me be more gentle and patient, with myself and with other people. Which means they've not just led me to the work and people I love; they've helped me work and love *better*. Not perfectly, but better. And for that I'm incredibly grateful. I couldn't ask for more.

Try = Intentional Practice

Those are two of my favorite words. "Intentional" and "Practice."

I like "intentional" because it implies focus, logic, strategic planning. That goes double for "practice," a word I love not just because of its connection to work but because of its connection to disciplines of all kinds, not least spiritual ones.

Tess Vigeland of NPR's *Marketplace* once interviewed BBC sports commentator Matthew Syed, who wrote a book about it. Piggybacking on another Malcolm Gladwell concept, the "10,000 Hour Rule"—i.e., extraordinary success in any endeavor requires (literally) 10,000 hours of practice—Syed's book emphasizes that it's not just a lot of willy-nilly practice that does the trick. He says you have to be focused: intentional, conscious. *Yes, I am practicing and this is what I'm practicing.* No amount of talent or luck can replace that kind of practice.

Here's a particularly interesting exchange from the *Marketplace* interview:

VIGELAND: *I think one of the practical applications here, you say the talent myth is disempowering because it causes individuals to give up if they don't make early progress. And your answer to that is again, look, don't worry about it, just keep practicing.*

SYED: *Yeah, in fact a brilliant psychologist, Carol Dweck from Stanford, has done some terrific research in this area. She took 400 fifth graders and gave them some simple puzzles. And afterwards half of them were praised for intelligence, for talent—"You must be really smart at this." The other half were praised for effort. "Gosh, you must have worked really hard." Then she gave them some more difficult tasks to complete. Those who were praised for talent, for intelligence, when they come across these really difficult challenges and started struggling, they thought, "Oh my goodness, I don't want to lose that smart label." And it actually zapped their ability to persevere on the task. Those who were praised for effort, when they came across this really difficult problem they thought, "Great, I can demonstrate now how hardworking I am." And they really ratcheted up their enthusiasm, kept going. So what Dweck argues very convincingly is that we must praise young people in any educational scenario for their effort and not for their talent, and try to embed what she calls the growth mindset.*

The Secret to Success

A while back, I came across a *NY Times* magazine article called "What If the Secret to Success is Failure?"⁵

⁵ Link: <https://nyti.ms/2TXd8d0>

The key players in the piece:

- **Dominic Randolph:** headmaster of an exclusive private school in New York.
- **David Levin:** co-founder of the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) charter schools.

- **Christopher Peterson:** University of Michigan psychology professor, education researcher, and co-author of a book called *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*.
- **Martin Seligman:** University of Pennsylvania psychology professor and co-author of *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*.
- **Sharon Duckworth:** formerly Seligman's graduate assistant at the University of Pennsylvania, now a professor herself who has come to some renown for her research in this area.

These folks gravitated toward each other because they are all interested in education and they all believe that there's more to successful human development than reading, writing, and arithmetic. Broadly defined, they're interested in the role of "character" and mind-set in contemporary teaching and learning.

Here's an interesting pull quote from the article:

*Duckworth's research convinced Levin and Randolph that they should try to foster self-control and grit in their students. Yet those didn't seem like the only character strengths that mattered. The full list of 24 [character strengths and virtues in Peterson's book], on the other hand, felt too unwieldy. So they asked Peterson if he could narrow the list down to a more manageable handful, and he identified a set of strengths that were, according to his research, especially likely to predict life satisfaction and high achievement. After a few small adjustments (Levin and Randolph opted to drop love in favor of curiosity), they settled on a final list: **ZEST, GRIT, SELF-CONTROL, SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE, GRATITUDE, OPTIMISM and CURIOSITY.***

(I added the caps and boldface for emphasis.)

And here's another pull quote:

When I asked Randolph to explain just what he thought Riverdale students were missing out on, he told me the story of his own scholastic career. He did well in boarding school and was admitted to Harvard, but when he got to college, he felt lost, out of step with the power-tie careerism of the Reagan '80s. After two years at Harvard, Randolph left for a year to work in a low-paying manual job, as a carpenter's helper,

trying to find himself. After college, he moved for a couple of years to Italy, where he worked odd jobs and studied opera. It was an uncertain and unsettled time in his life, filled with plenty of failed experiments and setbacks and struggles. Looking back on his life, though, Randolph says that the character strengths that enabled him to achieve the success that he has were not built in his years at Harvard or at the boarding schools he attended; they came out of those years of trial and error, of taking chances and living without a safety net. And it is precisely those kinds of experiences that he worries that his students aren't having.

"The idea of building grit and building self-control is that you get that through failure," Randolph explained. "And in most highly academic environments in the United States, no one fails anything."

Failure: The Root of Cynicism?

Before we can truly get right with failure, I believe we have to understand cynicism. And before we do *that*, let's, for a second, talk about where (I think) cynicism really comes from. It comes from fear and sadness (*not* failure).

Fear and sadness are normal and almost certainly *useful* human emotions. Some people are a little more likely to be scared and sad. Artists and teenagers/young adults tend to be among them. A fair amount of that is due to hormones and brain chemistry, but a lot of it has to do with the fact that these two groups of people tend to face a lot of failure, doubt, insecurity, ambiguity, powerlessness, and indifference. I suppose everybody does, but it tends to be more direct and more pervasive for these two sets of folks.

Cynicism is an understandable defensive response to fear and sadness, and it usually manifests itself as sarcasm, negativity, and/or apathy. Therefore, it's *toxic*. Always. Understandable, sometimes, but always toxic.

Happy, successful people in all walks of life get scared and sad just like unhappy, unsuccessful people do. They just respond to it differently. They *don't* get cynical. Instead, they figure out the root cause of their fear and sadness and address it to the best of their ability. Sometimes—lots of times—that means just letting themselves be scared and sad for a little while. They understand how their behavior, thoughts, and emotions all feed off of each other. Negativity in any one of those areas creates negativity in the other areas as well. They also understand

that it's hard for anybody to think or feel a certain way on command. It's usually easier to change behavior and trust that, in time, the thoughts and emotions will follow suit. They know that making basic, daily behavioral changes can have a major impact on your overall well-being. Just doing the non-cynical thing—even, or especially, if you feel cynical—can help break through the fear and sadness. It might take some time and effort, but it will work.

And they know a great magic trick when it comes to this sort of thing: often the simplest, best, most life-affirming behavioral change somebody can make is to remove herself from a cynical environment. It's certainly never a bad first step.

Cynicism: A Socratic Interlude

SO LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT...

Okay.

WHAT IS CYNICISM?

Cynicism is always a mask for fear and sadness. Always.

HOW DOES IT MANIFEST ITSELF?

Sarcasm. Negativity. Apathy.

Maybe there are other ways, but those are the big ones.

Think of somebody you know who always puts other people down or goes for laughs at their expense, especially if those other people show genuine, unabashed vulnerability, optimism, or effort—in other words, if they show that they honestly, earnestly care about something, someplace, or someone other than themselves.

Think of somebody you know who says no all the time, to everything: no, that can't work...no, you'll never make it...no, I'm not good enough...no, I won't try...no, things will never get better.

Think of somebody you know who's always "Like, you know, whatever, I don't really care, it doesn't matter..." about things that really *do* matter.

All those somebodies?

They're scared and sad. You can count on it.

Maybe they're feeling other things too, but fear and sadness are at the core. (Here's another secret worth knowing: if somebody is *particularly* sarcastic or negative or apathetic towards a specific person, place, thing, or activity, there's a really good chance that person, place, thing, or activity makes [or has made] them *particularly* scared and sad in the past.)

WHAT'S WRONG WITH BEING SCARED AND SAD?

Absolutely nothing.

I would never tell anyone not to be scared or sad. Those are normal human emotions, and let's be honest: there are *lots* of legitimate reasons to be scared and sad. There always have been, and I'll go out on a not-so-tenuous limb to say there always will be, too. People die, they lie, they leave, they lose. Etc. Lather, rinse, repeat.

That might sound pessimistic, but it's not, because here's yet *another* secret: for the most part, "things" are pretty much always getting a little bit *better* in some ways and a little bit *worse* in other ways, all at the same time. That goes for big social mechanisms like our governments and political systems, our economic systems, our technologies, etc., but it also goes for personal stuff, too: our relationships, our bodies, our creative lives, the places where we live, love, work, and learn. Everything.

The reason for this sturm-und-drang is that "things" always *change*, and change always brings both new opportunities and new challenges, most of which we never really expected and don't know how to respond to at first. Change can be scary and sad: you're losing what you had and you're not always sure what's taking its place (that's where the "little bit worse" part usually comes in). It can also be exciting, inspiring, and liberating, which obviously feels "a little bit better." Most of the time, it's some combination of all those things at once.

Your perspective—what you choose to emphasize, where you place your focus—makes a *huge* difference in how you respond to all of that. **HUGE.**

And, oh by the way, let's not pretend we humans have a corner on the market of fear and sadness. Animals get scared and sad, too. I'm no evolutionary biologist, but that would seem to suggest that, at least in some contexts, fear and sadness (along with a range of other emotions) might actually serve some purpose in creating and sustaining life as we know it.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM THEN?

The problem isn't fear and sadness; it's our response to them. Unfortunately, most of us start off at a disadvantage when it comes to developing a positive response to fear and sadness because there's a pretty strong cultural bias against those emotions. We identify them as weakness, as impediments to happiness and success. But that's not what they are. They're just two very normal, very *ancient* emotions that are experienced by a range of sentient beings on planet Earth, probably for very good reasons. Reasons that ultimately help us thrive—or at least survive. So you can rest assured that happy, successful people experience fear and sadness just as unhappy, unsuccessful people do. (Just like elephants, whales, parakeets, dogs; maybe even lilies and seashells, too, for all I know.) It's not that happy, successful people are never scared and sad. It's that far more often than not, they know how to respond to it in better, more resilient ways.

I'll give you three guesses whether cynicism is a part of that better response. Actually, let's not be coy. Let's be absolutely clear: the answer is no. Cynicism is never a part of the better response to fear and sadness. No, not ever.

SO WHAT'S WRONG WITH CYNICISM?

Everything, actually. It kills creativity, progress, potential, faith, optimism, hope. It creates a negative feedback loop of fear and sadness. Fear and sadness, multiplied exponentially—not just for the cynic but for everyone around her. There's nothing that scorches the creative earth more completely.

IF IT'S SO BAD, WHY ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE SO CYNICAL? AND WHY DOESN'T BAD STUFF HAPPEN TO THEM? FOR INSTANCE, YOU DON'T OFTEN SEE THEM FAILING SPECTACULARLY, OR LOOKING STUPID IN FRONT OF LOTS OF PEOPLE, ETC.

Because it makes a lot of sense to want to protect yourself from feeling emotions that (A) you have a hard time managing on your own and that (B) the rest of the

world either ignores or frowns upon or downright flees as if they were some sort of fatal infectious disease.

Also there's safety in numbers. I mean, yeah, everybody's scared and sad, and that pretty much sucks. But at least they're scared and sad *together*. For a lot of folks, feeling alone is the scariest, saddest thing there is. So they put on a mask and—this is important—they try to make everybody else put on a mask, too. So they can feel safe and not alone.

Sometimes they try to impose their will on other people intentionally, and that's particularly bad—mean-spirited, cowardly, insecure. A lot of times, though, they don't even know that's what they're doing. They think they're being funny. Or realistic. Or worldly and wise. Sometimes they even think they're saving themselves and other people a lot of time, trouble, and heartache. Like it's a service or something. An act of goodwill. Unfortunately, the truth is they're doing pretty much the opposite of all of the above.

Happy, successful people value and cultivate creativity, progress, potential, faith, optimism, and hope—in themselves and in others. Unhappy, unsuccessful people do not. Whether or not you ever receive any attention or accolades for the things you create, I want all of you to be happy, successful people. Period. End stop.

With that said, one of the things creative types share in common is that we value and seek to cultivate a particular kind of progress, potential, faith, optimism, and hope. Which is to say, we aspire to take our fascinations, obsessions, "loves," and turn them into things have meaning and value, for ourselves and others. In a perfect world, we would aspire to turn them into a sustainable creative process that can conceivably last a lifetime. That's a hard, tenuous business, one that can sometimes—strangely—make us feel sad, scared, and alone.

God, that's such a weird truth about it, one that's so blatantly obvious to anybody who's ever faced a blank canvas or a blinking cursor (et al): this impulse to create something beautiful and lasting and true often invites—forces—us to face our deepest personal doubts, fears, and limitations:

Why am I doing this? Am I good enough? Who cares what I think? Will anybody ever even read this? What if somebody does read it and not only (a) she thinks it sucks but also (b) she thinks it's the best I can do? What if it does suck and what if it

is the best I can do? What if I'm trying as hard as I can and somebody laughs at me? God. What if I'm trying as hard as I can and everybody laughs at me?

Newsflash: I don't always know the answers to those questions. I still ask them of myself all the time. And while I mean for you to take that vulnerable little revelation as comfort and reassurance, I can see where it might be a little discouraging too—you mean it never gets better?!

"...‘things’ are always getting better in some ways and worse in other ways, all at the same time."

WELL, DAMMIT. WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO THEN? YOU SAY I'M SUPPOSED TO "RESPOND DIFFERENTLY" TO FEAR AND SADNESS. BUT HOW?

Consider the following three statements, two of which tend to create and/or reflect cynicism and one of which does not:

Statement #1: *"I'm scared and sad, as usual. The world/my life sucks, as usual. This particular situation sucks, too, just like all the other situations I've ever dealt with."*

AKA: (Life sucks)[∞] + Then You Die

With this mentality, it's really almost impossible to find a saving grace. Somebody with this mindset is convinced fear and sadness are an existential, intrinsic, and probably permanent part of who he is, PLUS this person has come to the conclusion that things are also existentially, intrinsically, probably permanently bad in the world at large.

Not only that, this person can't see a relationship between these two judgments. He doesn't think there are any active steps he can take to make the world/his life/his situation better, but even if the context immediately surrounding him magically got better all on its own, he is convinced he would still be scared and sad. Just because the world/life is inherently a drag. There's pretty much no hope of things ever changing for the better, so why even try?

In the "best" case scenario, this attitude leads to a mostly self-directed cynicism of apathy and negativity—a crawl-into-the-fetal-position brand of learned helplessness.

Even more serious, though, this attitude can lead to (and/or reflects an underlying issue with) chronic depression, which goes beyond mere cynicism and is not to be taken lightly.

If you or someone you care about feels this way, it's important to understand that simply hoping to "snap out of it" isn't the best approach to take. It usually doesn't work, and it can even be dangerous. The smartest, most mature, bravest thing to do is to ask for help from people you trust. (FYI: I speak from experience here.)

Statement #2: *"I'm scared and sad BECAUSE the world/my life/this situation sucks."*

This one's a little bit more manageable, just because the person in question recognizes that there's some relationship between her emotional life and her external circumstances. In this case, that recognition can often lead to anger and indignation, but those emotions aren't cynical, per se. Anger can sometimes be useful because it can lead somebody to take active steps to change her behavior and (therefore) her external circumstances. Anger is, after all, a kind of energy.

It can turn into cynicism pretty easily, though, if she doesn't use that angry energy to change her circumstances in constructive ways and instead (A) internalizes it or (B) points it like a weapon at other people, usually in the form of negativity and sarcasm.

This attitude can also get dicey because it puts a good bit of focus on external circumstances, which we don't always completely control. What happens if you can't change the situation? Or what if you *do* change the situation—and *keep* changing the situation—but you're still scared and sad? Which, I mean, is technically possible.

Statement #3: *"I'm scared and sad; THEREFORE I THINK the world/my life/this situation sucks RIGHT NOW."*

So we're not totally out of the woods yet, but we can see the clearing from here. Yes, you're still scared and sad. Yes, you still think the world/your life/this situation sucks. No, none of that is fun. But it's hard to live a full, vibrant life without encountering some fear, sadness, and other assorted situations that really suck. (I mean, seriously: would you even want to? That sounds a lot like emotional numbness to me.)

Two good things about this approach are that (A) it recognizes the shifting relationship between emotions and circumstances and (B) the attention has shifted from the circumstances to the emotional response: in this case, fear and sadness. The truth is, you can't always control your circumstances, but you almost always can control your response to them. It takes practice and maybe a little help from people you love and trust, but it's possible.

Even more crucial, it's important to recognize that emotions (e.g., fear and sadness) lead to perceptions—not hard and fast realities. Somebody with this attitude doesn't necessarily believe that "the world/her life/this situation sucks" existentially, intrinsically, epically, and forevermore. She understands that it's possible that she just *thinks* "the world/her life/this situation sucks" *right now* because she's scared and sad and those can be hard emotions to process.

There's a *huge*, life-changing difference between this attitude and the other two. They all involve fear, sadness, and a whole lot of suck, but the latter promises a chance to rebound in the not-too-distant future. Perceptions are very often distorted, especially when you're scared and sad. When the emotions change, so do the perceptions. That's true for everybody, and it's a really useful and empowering insight. It's the true antidote for cynicism. Things are getting better in some ways and worse in other ways. Like they always do.

"This too shall pass."

In fact, it's not a stretch to say that the way you manage your emotions can influence your external reality, too. That's why so many happy, successful people seem to be particularly "lucky." It's not magic. It's not even luck. People who can manage their emotions, resist cynicism, and who habitually take tangible action to cultivate creativity, progress, potential, faith, optimism, and hope—in themselves and in others—actually do have more opportunities than people who don't do those things. Not only that, they're better at recognizing a good opportunity when it comes along, and they have the confidence, ability, and courage to take advantage of it.

CHAPTER 2

Care + Feeding of the Creative Body + Mind

I. Regarding the Body

One of my favorite songwriters makes this metaphor about how the best songs are like the silvery trail a snail leaves behind on its way to wherever it's going. The world sees the silver shimmer but forgets or never knew in the first place that the shiny stuff is just an excretion of where this mucousy little creature's been. It's a good metaphor. It applies to poems and stories too. All kinds of creativity.

Speaking of metaphors:

Did you know that dolphins evolved from land mammals? Look it up; I'm pretty sure it's true. I don't have the knowledge, space, or really even the inclination to get into the evolutionary biology here. I'm mostly interested in the metaphorical implications: in this case, the ocean was something new and strange and foreign, and the species adapted its physical form to this wholly different environment, one that provides it shelter, abundant sustenance, a dearth of natural predators. In the process, the animal went from looking kind of like a deer to looking like a cross between a big fish and a little whale.

That is truly fucking amazing. (Excuse my French.)

Bodies adapt to their surroundings; they shape themselves to fit. They do, that is, if they're ever going to thrive. That means, to be at your best, you have to pay attention to your environment. Seek an environment in which you can thrive. Shelter. Abundant sustenance. A dearth of natural predators. And, keep in mind, your ideal environment might not be the environment you started out in. When you do find the environment that suits you, I can't promise you'll develop sonar in your teeth (though that would be cool), but there's no question you will evolve into your best, most creative, most resilient self.

Now here are some practical, non-metaphorical things you can do to tend to your environment—any environment, even (or especially) if it's not the perfect environment for you—so that you can thrive physically, mentally, and emotionally (and, therefore, creatively too):

Sleep. Chronic sleep deprivation is rampant—and glorified—in our culture. If you did nothing more than make sure you got 8-10 hours of good sleep every night, you would be doing arguably the single most effective thing you could do to improve all aspects of your life: your emotional and physical well-being, your academic and creative performance, your personal interactions. You name it.

Here's a few things to consider when it comes to sleeping well, especially if you're not sleeping well already:

- Sleep in a dark place. Circadian rhythms are closely linked to cycles of light and darkness. Likewise, try to expose yourself to at least a few minutes of bright sunlight during the day.
- Sleep in a quiet place. Wear ear plugs, if necessary. If you need ambient noise to fall asleep, find something regular, rhythmic, and soft (i.e., an electric fan)—preferably something on a timer that will turn off at some point after you fall asleep. Try to avoid using music, especially music with words. You're trying to get your brain to shut down conscious activity. Don't give it more stimulation to process. You might not think you're thinking, but your brain doesn't know that.
- Develop a sleep routine. It cues your body that it's time to shut down. At the very least, go to bed at a similar time every night and wake up at a similar time each morning, even on weekends.
- Cut out bright light and electronic activity at least an hour prior to sleeping.
- Stop eating and drinking two hours prior to sleeping. Indigestion can be a big factor in insomnia, fitful sleep, and nightmares.
- Try not to sleep with pets. They often snore, fidget, and don't sleep through the night.

Breathe. Consciously work to make your breathing deeper, slower, and more regular. I'm serious. There's a raft of scientific evidence that indicates if you manage the most basic physical system in your body—your breathing—you'll be better able to regulate your moods and you'll improve your overall well-being. After all, your breath is one of the few (*only?*) systems in your body that is linked to both the somatic and the autonomic nervous system: you can breathe voluntarily *and* involuntarily. It's a direct connection—the direct connection—between the body's ancient irrational genius and the mind's clever, precocious (sometimes stormy) dance. Being more conscious of that link is really, really good for you. Here's what you do:

- Breathe deeply through your nose to a count of four. (1-2-3-4.) Breathe so that your diaphragm, which is below your chest and above your gut, fully expands.
- Hold that breath to a count of seven.
- Breathe out through your mouth, slowly, to a count of eight.
- Repeat that cycle at least four (but no more than eight) times, twice a day and whenever you get stressed, scared, or sad.

It works. It usually takes the edge off anxious moments almost immediately, but if you do it faithfully—every day, twice a day, and whenever you feel really stressed or angry—you'll be surprised how much more emotionally balanced and resilient you feel.

Drink water. A lot of it. Every day. It's hard to drink something you buy at a store or restaurant that doesn't have caffeine, alcohol, or sugar in it—often more than one and sometimes even all three. I'll get to the stimulant/depressant angle of those three substances in a second, but the first two are also diuretics, which means they tax the kidneys and dehydrate you. (Excess sugar taxes the kidneys too.) Hydration is as basic and crucial to maintaining good health as are sleeping and breathing. The body breaks down very quickly without any one of the three. If you drink mostly Coke or coffee or Red Bull (or beer), you're not going to die from it immediately, but you are going to be over-caffeinated (or drunk) *and* you're probably going to be chronically dehydrated, both of which unnecessarily stress your body, depleting its energy stores and making it less resilient. Also, to appeal to your vanity: people who age well (i.e., they look younger than they are at 40, 50, 60...) almost invariably attribute it to drinking a lot of water (and getting enough good sleep).

Walk. Walking is an essential human exercise, the simplest, most ancient work a bi-pedal body can do. All bodies need work, the simpler the better. A simple-working body makes space for a resting mind. In fact, Buddhists do something called walking meditation, in which they focus on each breath and each step, bringing them into synch. Most faith traditions have some similar corollary, especially mystic traditions. From Canterbury to Mecca, and all points in between. And, of course, the list of writers who count walking as an essential part of their creative process is too long to enumerate here. Simply put, walking works magic. (Here's an article in the *New Yorker*: "[Why Walking Helps Us Think.](#)")

Get outside. Humans as we know them have been around for about 100,000 years. We spent 90% of that time as nomadic hunter-gatherer types, and we spent a good portion of the remaining 10% of the time in agrarian societies. Urbanization is really pretty new to us as a species (and industrialization is even newer). As of this writing, London has only been around for the last 2000 years. Rome is 800 years older than that. New York City, one of the oldest cities in the U. S., is only about 400 years old. Birmingham isn't even 200 years old. Sun, grass, trees, clouds, mud, streams, snow, stars, rain, wind—they speak to something ancient and timeless in us. Let yourself listen. Get out in it. Even if it's in a city park.

Give. Preferably a little more than you think you can spare. I'm not talking about money, necessarily. The most precious thing you can give is your undivided attention (to a person, a cause you believe in, a job you really care to do well, etc.)—the time, effort, and energy that requires. Another precious thing you can give is your joy. When you feel joyful, share it. Smile, laugh, play. Wish these things on other people. Invite them to smile, laugh, and play with you.

Detox, Part I. Be mindful of the garden-variety stimulants and depressants you're ingesting on a regular basis, especially if you have a hard time regulating your moods. Caffeine, alcohol, and sugar are the most pervasive of these. Contrary to popular opinion, everybody reacts to them differently. This probably goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway: people can easily develop physical and emotional dependencies on all three of these substances, especially people who have a hard time regulating their moods. Plus this: I've said it already, and you probably know this from experience, but here it is again: creative types, young folks, and especially young creative folks, tend to have a hard time regulating their moods, at least from time to time. Caffeine, alcohol, and sugar (etc.) can make it that much harder to sustain an equilibrium. And yet, paradoxically enough, people regularly use these substances (often unwittingly) to try to stabilize or enhance their moods. Unfortunately, the long-term effect on your moods and your overall mental state is almost always the opposite (i.e., crashes of various sorts), and the effect on your overall physical health is usually (and broadly) negative too. I'm not trying to be a killjoy. I drink coffee and alcohol and I eat sugar. (Because, PS, it's *legal* for me to do all of that.) And that's precisely how I know they can really mess me up if I'm not super, super careful. I'm guessing that, on some level, it's probably the same for you (or for people you will encounter). Anyway. If you're having Body-Mind-Spirit troubles, look for the

culprits here first. Again, these things are only short-term fixes and they have a tendency to make things more difficult in the long-run.

Disconnect. Limit digital connectivity and TMI. When Nicola Tesla brought radio waves to the British Isles, a man tried to break into his house and kill him because he believed the waves were the cause of a series of mysterious ailments that befell his family soon after Tesla's arrival. He was probably crazy, this would-be assassin, or at least not in his right mind at the time. But that doesn't mean he was wrong, necessarily. Our bodies are truly exquisite sensory devices; they interpret and feel things our puny brains can't access directly, consciously. The "off" button exists for a reason. Luckily, a lot of the information available to us is pretty worthless. At the very least it's redundant. We can live—and live better—if we're oblivious to a lot of it. Less is more in this case. That goes double for radio waves and the like.

Listen carefully. Be conscious about your music. Especially if you have trouble regulating your moods or if you're going through an emotional rough patch. I love music as much as the next guy, but music can be a powerful stimulant and an equally powerful depressant. If you're sad all the time and all you listen to is sad music, there's a good chance you're actually cultivating your own sadness. You're certainly reinforcing it. Think of your music as the soundtrack of your mental state. A taste for syncopation and wide, dynamic swings (loud to quiet, quiet to loud) *might* be a clue to where you are emotionally. A taste for minor chords and maudlin lyrics *might* be a clue. A taste for growling distortion and blood-curdling screams might be a clue. I'm not saying you shouldn't listen to such music. Just be conscious of how it affects (and/or reflects) your mood. On a side note, try to develop a taste for at least some form of instrumental music, preferably something soothing and vibrant, with a regular rhythm to it. Just to cleanse your emotional palate, so to speak. In my experience, the so-called "World Music" is a good choice for this. Big Band music (Count Basie, Bennie Goodman, etc.) works for me too. But that's just me. Explore and experiment for yourself.

Cultivate silence. Silence—true silence, meditative silence—can be a mood stabilizer. If your mind buzzes in silence, try concentrating on the breathing exercise above. Or just focus on your breathing, without trying to regulate it. Just think "in" with the in-breath, "out" with the out-breath. When you realize your mind has started buzzing again, just go back to concentrating on your breath. If that fails, try reading.

Read. Reading is a form of true silence. Especially for us bookish types. And it builds the creative capacities of your mind. I'm sure there are studies to back me up on this.

Last but not least:

Detox, Part II. If a person, place, thing, or activity helps you cultivate creativity, optimism, and a feeling of sustainable well-being: seek them/it out. Persistently, faithfully, joyfully. And, to the extent that you can, share it with other people. The world needs your creativity, optimism, and feelings of sustainable well-being.

By the way, full disclosure:

There's not a single element on this list I haven't truly struggled with at one point or another in my life, often to the point of despair. In fact, I'm still a work-in-progress when it comes to just about all of them. I am far from perfect at this stuff; really, I'm not even good at it.

What I do know, from my own experience, is that when I feel frazzled, when I feel puny, when I feel scared or sad or when I feel like I'm not my best self, it's always been rededicating myself to something on this list (often just one thing on this list) that brings me back to life. Pick the thing you can do. The simplest, easiest thing for you in that moment. And do it. Often you get a nice domino effect: you eventually gain the strength and equilibrium to choose to do *another* thing on the list and then another, and all of a sudden, your world has cycled through to another version of itself.

It doesn't last forever, unfortunately, this rejuvenation; it invariably runs its course. But the efficacy of the list does seem to endure. Like any true friend, it always welcomes you home, no matter where you've been or how long you've been away.

II. Regarding the Mind

It's crucial to listen to the right voices in your head.

Here's something Allen Ginsberg said about writing poems:

The parts that embarrass you the most are usually the most interesting poetically, are usually the most naked of all, the rawest, the goofiest, the strangest and most eccentric and at the same time, most representative, most universal...That was something I learned from Kerouac, which was that spontaneous writing could be embarrassing...The cure for that is to write things down which you will not publish and which you won't show people. To write secretly...so you can actually be free to say anything you want...It means abandoning being a poet, abandoning your careerism, abandoning even the idea of writing any poetry, really abandoning, giving up as hopeless—abandoning the possibility of really expressing yourself to the nations of the world. Abandoning the idea of being a prophet with honor and dignity, and abandoning the glory of poetry and just settling down in the muck of your own mind...You really have to make a resolution to write for yourself..., in the sense of not writing to impress yourself, but just writing what your self is saying.

For what it's worth, I think he's probably right, and I think it goes for most any creative enterprise. Not just poetry. Not just writing. That spirit, that attitude, I mean. The attitude of trying to be open to who you really are (muck and all) and trying the best you can to express it with no fear and no expectation of gaining anything from it. On the flipside, I do think there is such a thing as negative self-talk. Sometimes what your self is saying isn't helpful.

Some potentially helpful mantras to reboot your self-talk:

Now is not then. Hat tip: Havi Brooks (@havi | FluentSelf.com) There's a difference between loving history/tradition/ghosts (which I know you do; I know I do) and being chained to the past (which none of us really is, even if we think we are). Speaking as someone who's heavily inclined toward nostalgia and who has a strong affinity for being haunted by the people and places I've loved and lost, I can say that telling myself "now is not then" has helped me be less sad. Less chained. This is especially useful when I don't particularly *want* to be sad and chained (which, I must admit, is not 100% of the time—this might be an important admission for you to make, I don't know). It's also helped me be a little less anxious, which is something I *do* want 100% of the time, though I fall *woefully* short of that mark on a daily basis.

Speaking of the past (and the future), I now yield the floor to my favorite poet-monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who has this to say about ghosts:

We're caught by the ghosts of the past and the future because we don't know they're ghosts. We think the past is still right here with us and we dwell in it. But if we can smile to the ghost of the past, and acknowledge that the past was there, but that now it is gone [please see: "Now is not then."], then we can have the smile of enlightenment. When we smile like that, it shows we have love for ourselves. We know the past and the future are not our enemies. We know how to live in this moment we are in right now. We need to live our daily moments deeply, as they occur. When we live and know that we are living, this is freedom.

It's okay. It's fine. Really. It is. Usually right now, at this very instant, there is no problem. Problems usually exist in the past or the future, both of which require us to use our imagination. Monsters and demons need us to imagine them. It's possible instead to imagine the best (angels and other forms of benevolent magic) for yourself. In fact, it's usually a good idea. Which leads us to...

It's possible. This one's about more than simply staying positive and hopeful, though it is about that, too. Most anything *is* possible, after all. But it's also about coping with fear and anxiety. If you're afraid of a particular outcome—if you're fearing the worst—this mantra reminds you to consider the many other possibilities. There are almost *always* other possibilities, other explanations, other potential outcomes that *don't* involve catastrophe. What are they? Make a list. Read it to yourself over and over again. Even if you can't think of the other possibilities, remember that somebody else probably *can* think of them. Find a trusted somebody-else to help you entertain the better possibilities. Also: catastrophe is rare. Even better, it's usually not insurmountable.

I don't know. You don't have to. Very often it's *better* not to. Dwell in mystery. Get comfortable there. Let it be your neutral ground, your default mode, your reset button. Not good or bad. *I don't know. It's okay, it's fine.* That's real enduring strength, a strength most people shun.

I'm listening. It's a Chatty Cathy, the Cosmos. You just have to tune in.

I'm here for you. Very often, the "I" you will need to be here for will be yourself. It's important to learn to be nice to yourself, to *mother* yourself in exactly the way

you know you need to be mothered. Delicious sandwiches, soups. A long nap or a walk, or a hot bath, with sea salts. A good book and some silence. A phone call to a far-flung kindred spirit. Etc. That said, being "here" for someone else is an antidote for a lot of the emotional distress that's rooted in self-consciousness and/or self-doubt. So, you know, like a lot of things: it's a balancing act.

CHAPTER 3

The Creative Spirit Is a Highly Sensitive Teenager

I wrote the following in preparation for a presentation I gave during a faculty in-service at my school. Again, it's a magnet school for precociously talented students in grades seven through twelve. They "major" in one of six specialties—five which are arts-related (Creative Writing, Dance, Music, Theatre Arts, and Visual Arts) and one of which is more academic in nature (Math/Science). It is a singularly diverse place, but I think there is one bit of crucial connective tissue to this unique environment.

The thesis of my presentation, as you will see, was that our students' creative capacities come with a highly calibrated sensitivity to the world around them. (Same can be said for teenagers, generally, I believe.) That's not a bug; it's a feature. But it does require some particular attention to the details of creating the right environment where they can thrive.

I offer it here only slightly edited because it occurs to me that this bond between creativity and sensitivity does not have a shelf-life. If we aspire to creative lives—if we seek communion with what I'm calling the Creative Spirit—we must attend to our peculiar sensitivities using the very same methods and insights I was trying to advocate for in my presentation to my fellow teachers. In a very real sense, we creative types must be our own mentors, our own advocates, our own teachers.

If we're going to do that, we have to understand—truly empathize—with our student(s)—especially if we are our own student. In other words, I'm inviting you to think of your Creative Spirit as a Highly Sensitive Child/Teenager, and to treat it accordingly: with love, patience, wonder, faith, and optimism.

The Tie that Binds Us?

I'm nearing two decades of teaching at ASFA. In all that time it seems that we've been searching for the thread that connects all our multifaceted parts. There have been times when we've seemed closer to discovering it, and there have been other times when we've seemed farther away. It's remained elusive.

And yet there *is* a tie that binds us. Most if not all of us feel it, intuitively. The smart hunch has always been that it doesn't have much to do with what we do (individually, collectively) or even how we do it. Those things are clearly and often

necessarily different, so trying to find similarities and synergies has always felt like putting a square peg in a round hole. No, the smart hunch is that the thing that truly connects us is who we are. Individually, collectively.

We've had several professional development sessions over the years regarding personality types. Myers-Briggs. Emergenetics. They've been popular and informative, but they've also focused (A) on our faculty and specifically (B) on the ways we as individuals are different. Diversity is wonderful, essential, unavoidable, and I think we're better at appreciating our individual differences because of these sessions.

But they haven't brought us closer to our thread.

This summer, a friend (@havi | The FluentSelf.com) suggested I read a book by Elaine Aron called *The Highly Sensitive Child: Helping Our Children Thrive When the World Overwhelms Them*. Frankly, I was reading it to try to understand my own weirdness, so I wasn't, at first, thinking about how this concept—the Highly Sensitive Child—might be an important clue to finding our thread as a school. Turns out I am highly “Highly Sensitive” according to Aron's rubric. I suspected as much already. That's why my friend suggested the book to me. The epiphany (hypothesis might be better) was that what I was reading in Aron's book had so many implications for what we do at ASFA. So many, in fact, that I started to think I may have stumbled on our thread.

I would bet a lot of money that I'm not the only HSP in the ASFA faculty. But more important than sussing out which of us is “Highly Sensitive,” I believe the real thread that binds us is the fact that, highly sensitive or not, we all teach in an exceptionally stimulating and stressful school environment that is home to a disproportionately large percentage of highly sensitive *adolescents*.

This, then, is an extended persuasive essay of sorts. It's also a call-to-arms/how-to guide. I'd like for us as a community to consider the possibility that Elaine Aron's work regarding Highly Sensitive children and adults might not only help us better understand who we are—individually, collectively—but it might also help us thrive beyond our wildest imagination.

What follows is based on reading two of Aron's books—*The Highly Sensitive Child* and *The Highly Sensitive Person*—augmented by a little bit of Google searching and informed by nearly twenty years teaching at this school. Then there's the

nearly 50 years (and counting) of stumbling and bumbling through life as an HSP myself. I don't claim to know everything about any of this: HSPs, teaching, teaching at ASFA, life, myself. I want to know more about all of it, and I hope you do, too. If so, keep reading.

The (Mad) Science

Jerome Kagan is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Harvard University. He spent his career studying what he called "highly reactive" babies and children. In a nutshell, this is what he found:

- 20% of all infants are "highly reactive." They pump and flex their limbs vigorously in response to minimal stress and stimuli. They often arch their backs as if irritated, and they cry more than other babies. (This incidence of highly reactive infants holds true in most higher animals.)
- Kagan's follow-up studies show that, by the time they reach their first birthday, two-thirds of highly reactive babies are "inhibited" (his word). They show higher levels of fear in new situations, and they have more allergies, insomnia, colic, and constipation than their non-highly reactive counterparts. Also their resting heart rates are generally higher and, under stress, their pupils dilate sooner and their vocal chords are tenser. Crucially, they tend to have much higher levels of norepinephrine and cortisol—stress hormones—in their bodily fluids, even when they're not under duress.
- Kagan's takeaway: there are important physiological (and probably genetic) differences between the way these babies and children process stress and stimuli and the ways their non-highly reactive counterparts do. They are physically, mentally, and emotionally more sensitive to their environment than the majority of their peers. And they don't "outgrow" it. This is probably how they were in the womb, this is definitely how they are now, and it's how they will be as adults. Given the presence of similarly "highly reactive" infants in other species, it would appear that, in terms of evolutionary biology, this difference might also be advantageous to a given species.
- Over the years, in longitudinal studies, Kagan found that "highly reactive" infants become children who are disproportionately influenced by their environments. As you might expect, if the environment was unstable and unsupportive, the kids Kagan studied were worse off than their non-highly reactive peers were in similarly unstable, unsupportive environments.

Even more fascinating: the highly reactive kids reaped MORE benefits from supportive, stable environments than their non-highly reactive peers did from similarly supportive, stable environments.

A bad environment exacerbated the challenges of this temperament, but a good one nurtured and developed the special gifts associated with it. For these kids, the right environment can truly mean the difference between persistent, predominant neurosis (namely, but not exclusively, anxiety and depression) and the exceptional creativity and insight that is often the birthright of this temperament and that the culture at large so desperately needs but only finds in short supply. In short, these kids are clearly worth the extra effort.

The Highly Sensitive Person: A Rose by Any Other Name

Enter Dr. Elaine Aron, a psychologist who has also studied this temperament. She agrees with Kagan's findings but she quibbles with his terminology, particularly because it emphasizes the inhibitions and drawbacks (both intrapersonal and interpersonal) associated with this temperament. She's the one who coined the term "Highly Sensitive Person" (HSP) because she believes it reflects a more accurate, holistic attitude toward the temperament.

The Four Attributes of HSPs

- HSPs process their experiences in greater depth than others.
- HSPs are easily over-aroused by stress and stimuli, regardless of whether the experience is positive or negative.
- HSPs are sensitive to subtle stimuli in their environments.
- HSPs have deep emotional reservoirs and are capable of uncommon empathy toward others.

Aron emphasizes the advantages of these attributes, and there are many. HSPs tend to be intelligent, intuitive, and imaginative—often exceptionally so. They see things others don't see and feel things others don't (sometimes can't) feel. They make great artists, writers, teachers, inventors, clergy, and visionaries. They also make great librarians, researchers, doctors, architects, and software engineers.

The primary disadvantages of this temperament, Aron argues, are largely due to the fact that Western culture isn't geared to value HSP strengths: it's loud, overstimulated, and superficial. She also argues—as does Susan Cain, in her book

Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking—that we desperately need HSPs to find ways to assert their gifts in order to temper some of the more vulgar attributes of the Digital Age. Both Aron and Cain believe that's largely up to the HSPs themselves, and the key to unlocking their gifts is (A) self-awareness and (B) the confidence that comes with self-acceptance.

A note on introversion and HSPs: Aron strongly believes that not all HSPs are introverts; in fact, she took Cain's book to task a little bit for confusing the two. An outgoing person can exhibit all of the four attributes above just as easily as a reserved one can. Aron estimates that approximately 70% of HSPs are "introverted," leaving a significant number of "extroverted" HSPs. The important thing to remember is that this is a temperament, not a personality, and as such, it's somewhat less malleable. An introvert can learn strategies to be more outgoing, even if it doesn't feel natural at first, and over time, his or her attitude toward social interaction can change. An HSP's brain chemistry and central nervous system are always going to respond to stress and stimuli in pretty much the same way. Also important to remember, especially for teachers: you can usually see the traits of introversion in someone else; you can't always see the types of sensitivity an HSP is experiencing.

The Three Types of Sensitivity in an HSP

- **Aesthetic Sensitivity.** This reflects a heightened awareness of aesthetic experiences: "Are you deeply moved by art, films, poetry, nature? Do you have a rich inner life?"
- **Low Sensory Threshold.** This refers to an individual's sensitivity to unpleasant stimuli: "Are you made uncomfortable by loud noises?"
- **Ease of Excitation.** This is the tendency to feel overwhelmed in response to demands: "Do you get rattled when you have a lot to do in a short amount of time?"

The latter two (low sensory threshold and ease of excitation) tend to be correlated. Aesthetic sensitivity is not necessarily correlated with either of the others. Strong tendencies to any one of these types of sensitivity can classify someone as an HSP, even if he or she doesn't identify with the other types of sensitivity at all. That said, many (but not all) HSPs strongly identify with more than one type of sensitivity, often all three.

The Two Brain Systems

As we consider the workings of an HSP brain, we find the crux of the matter in two related brain systems:

- **The Behavioral Activation System:** parts of the brain that take in messages from the senses and send out orders to our body to take action. This system pushes us toward curiosity, boldness, impulsiveness, and sensory stimulation.
- **The Behavioral Inhibition System** (aka: "Pause-to-Check"): parts of the brain that make us alert, cautious, watchful for signs and dangers. Stress hormones play an important role in this system. It stands to reason that an overabundance of stress hormones —norepinephrine and cortisol, in particular—would create a more active "Pause-to-Check" system.

Both of these systems are important to individuals and to a species. Bold action creates opportunities and abundance. A little caution goes a long way, though, especially when it prevents catastrophe. In terms of a group or a species, you probably don't need (or want) everybody playing sentinel—one in five is just about right. Thus, we can deduce the evolutionary role this more cautious type of temperament plays, and it's clearly an important one.

It gets a little more complicated when you're talking about finding the right ratio in an individual. The short answer is that there isn't any one perfect ratio. It's about balance. People who have a very active "Pause-to-Check" system but a pretty inert Activation system are content to sit back, watch, and stay out of harm's way. Likewise, people with very robust Activation systems and relatively inactive "Pause-to-Check" systems are happy to jump out of planes or run with the bulls in Pamplona or quit a good job to open a restaurant in New York City.

That's not to say either of these temperament types won't have to deal with the external consequences of their action or inaction, or that all of those consequences will be good ones. (The chute might not open, the restaurant might fail; the stock might have soared, she might have said yes.) And, while either type could conceivably be an HSP, they're just not likely to have much psychic unrest regarding their basic nature. The uninhibited bold ones might be aesthetically sensitive but they probably aren't overwhelmed by excitement and stimuli, while the cautious ones very well might be easily overwhelmed, but

they're not likely to put themselves into positions where they're over-aroused, either positively or negatively.

The psychic unrest comes in for people who have robust Behavioral Activation Systems—they're curious, sensory, imaginative, and perhaps even, in some ways, bold—but they also have robust "Pause-to-Check" systems. They think three steps ahead, see details (and obstacles) others don't see, and pay close attention to changes in their environment. They probably also produce more stress hormones than most people, and they're probably scared to be wrong or to fail. If they also happen to be HSPs—which, in the case of creative types is quite possible, if not likely—this Mind-Body-Spirit tug-of-war can tax them to core. In the worst case scenario, all this overstimulation can drain their creativity altogether.

Guess which type of HSP I think we tend to have at ASFA? You got it: the tug-of-war ones. My evidence is mostly anecdotal and all qualitative; I've got no double-blind longitudinal studies to back me up. But I've been here more than a decade. Experience and institutional memory counts for something too. Plus I'm an HSP. I pay close attention to my environment.

What's more: HSP that I am, my guess is that we have more than 20% HSPs in our student body and in our faculty. Probably a lot more. Our primary mission is, after all, geared toward students who process their experience deeply and who have above average aesthetic sensitivity. For their part, HSPs fit that to a tee: they tend to be creative; a lot (though not all) of them are very conscientious. Especially gifted creative people tend to be much more attuned to their environments, they tend to process their experiences more deeply, they tend to be more sensitive to subtle stimuli, especially in their field of interest. That description sounds like an awful lot (though, admittedly, not all) of the students I encounter at ASFA, across the specialties. If an ordinary high school has 15-20% HSP population, how high might our percentage be?

In fact, I think even ordinary high schools likely have an above average percentage of what I call "de facto" HSPs. Maybe 80-85% of the students at regular high schools weren't HSCs when they were little kids, and they might not end up as HSPs when they're adults, but while they're adolescents, a whole lot of them sure do act like HSPs. Given the volume and intensity of Western/digital culture, that HSP-ness is even more pronounced among teenager.

Adolescents (and Artists): De Facto HSPs

Let's go back to the two brain systems: what is adolescence, for everybody, if not an awkward, harrowing tight-wire act between the two systems? It can plummet out of control in the best of circumstances. All these strange new messages, this overabundance of sensory input, plus a witches' brew of new hormones—it all conspires to push adolescents TO TAKE ACTION!! NOW!!! And yet it's highly unfamiliar territory, the possibilities for humiliation and epic failure seem to lurk at every turn, and the absolute last thing most adolescents want to do is make a mistake and look childish and/or stupid. Everything is dangerous and alluring, scary and exhilarating all at once. Life is fraught with possibility and peril for these kids. That, my friends, is a psychic tug-of-war.

And do you want to know what the ninth circle of hell is for most actual HSP adolescents? It's called high school. Especially the regular kind. (If you've forgotten or don't believe me, just re-watch [The Breakfast Club](#).)

The Proper Environment: A Diverse Community of Explorers!⁶

⁶This tagline — “a diverse community of explorers” — forms the heart of my school's mission statement.

But we're not a regular high school, and we're better with HSPs—the actual ones and most of the de facto ones, too. I think that's because we're smaller and because we have a higher than normal population of HSPs, both as faculty and as students. In that way, we're sort of like the Hogwarts of HSPs, which is why so many of our new students feel as if a whole new world has been opened up to them when they arrive, and it's why they often “come out of their shell” here. It's safer to express many of the aspects of their personality that they were hiding at their former schools. They just didn't know there was a place where they could interact with so many people who are different in the ways that they are different, and that knowledge is liberating and empowering.

Then there's the fact that our Student Support Services staff is an active, invested, and integral presence in our day-to-day operation, both in terms of reactive stuff (counseling, conflict resolution) and proactive stuff (retreats and H&W, Heritage Panel, PEER helpers, college advising, etc.).

I also think it's because we offer our students more autonomy than ordinary schools do; students can typically carve out their own space here, literally and figuratively. That's very important for HSPs, as is the fact that we're able to provide more one-on-one instruction than most schools.

Are we the perfect environment for HSPs, de facto or otherwise? No. No school is. Are we as good as we can be? Honestly, no. Not quite. We're not bad. We're good. But we can be better. And we should want to be the best because a place that's great for HSPs is a place that's great for all creative people—and, I would argue, for most adolescents in general.

So how can we be better?

The Three E's of teaching HSPs

In fact, much of what Aron suggests can be boiled down to these three words, all of which happen to start with the letter E:

- **Empathy**—Be kind.
- **Encouragement**—Stay positive.
- **Equanimity**—Stay calm.

And again: I think those are all important markers of good teaching. The goal is to exhibit them as close to 100% of the time as we can, keeping in mind that 50% is often just as bad as (if not worse than) 0% because truly kind, positive, and calm environments are *reliably* kind, positive, and calm. Inconsistently kind, positive, and calm environments breed anxiety, which is the kryptonite of an HSP.

Achieving 100% empathy, encouragement, and equanimity is difficult but not impossible. I know I'm not there yet, but I've seen it in others, so I know it can be done.

My Two Ten Cents: How This Applies to Us

Here's an Aron-informed list of some important attributes of an HSP-friendly environment, some of which I think we're pretty good at doing and others we might not be as good at doing. (Note: advice and suggestions are for entertainment purposes only.)

I invite you to look at this list and think about whether you do these things in your classroom.⁷ If so, great. How do you do them? If it works, have you shared that strategy with colleagues in your department? If you've tried one or some of these things and haven't been successful, is there another way to approach it? Can you pick one item on this list that you haven't tried and try it this year? You don't have to go whole hog. Dabble, experiment.

⁷To reiterate: this invitation transcends a traditional classroom or student-teacher interaction. Your classroom is your life; you are your student.

Okay. Here goes. An HSP-friendly environment provides:

1^c— Regular interaction with other HSPs. As I've already suggested, this is our ace-in-the-hole, but we can't simply rely on it to create the best possible environment for us and our students. We have to build on the advantages it creates.

2^c— High rewards for effort, risk, and creativity PLUS low consequences for failure. It's the combination of these two approaches that so powerfully and exponentially fosters creativity. The most important values we can instill in our students are creative risk, extra effort, and resiliency. Fall down seven times, get up eight.

Notice that I'm advocating low consequences for failure, not low opportunities for failure. The first part of the statement—about effort, risk, and creativity—requires MORE opportunities for failure. Many more. Any worthwhile creative endeavor in any of our specialties involves far more failure than success. Therefore, we have to teach our students how to properly respond to and learn from failure, how to use it as a catapult and not a road block. That's why the consequences have to be low. If they're too high, too early, the PTSD of cynicism and anxiety (apathy, negativity, fear, sadness) quickly sets in and the creative spirit just as quickly dies.

Am I saying this approach isn't applicable—or can't work—in core academic classes? Not at all. In fact, the more core academic teachers adopt this approach, the more symbiotic their students' academic experience is to their specialty experience. There are always creative and fair ways to lower the consequences for failure, as long as a student is willing to put forth some extra effort. Remember:

it's the combination that works the magic. If you have one without the other, there's a good chance you're actually hampering creativity, especially with HSPs. For example, high stakes assessments, especially at the end of quarters and semesters, present very high consequences for failure. You could, of course, reduce or eliminate high stakes assessments altogether. Explore the possibilities of portfolio assessments or contract grading, maybe. What about shifting to extended, open-book, open-note assessments? Perhaps more plausibly, you could simply allow your students to improve a low grade by revisiting these tests or papers and addressing their shortcomings, either in a new assignment or in a revision of the original one. Even pushing higher-stakes assessments up in the calendar, so that students have time to recover from a poor performance on a test or paper with subsequent (easier) assignments, can provide a little relief.

3^e— Prioritized correction. A self-indulgent personal anecdote: When I was a little kid, I sometimes went to work with my dad. He was a lawyer for the government in DC, so this wasn't always the most interesting environment for a Highly Sensitive Child such as myself. One time, I guess I was six or so, I was in his office while he was having a casual conversation with one of his colleagues, a really nice man named Bill Trencher. Bill was a close friend of my dad's, several years younger, a new dad himself, and I always liked being around him. He had a good vibe: kind, positive, calm.

So anyway, I'm bored and nobody's paying attention to me, and there's a floor fan running near where I was sitting. I can't remember what possessed me to do this, but I knelt down and I guess I got mesmerized by the fan because I decided to stick my finger in it. I still have all my fingers and luckily I wasn't injured. But when the blade hit my index finger, it sounded like a shot had gone off. My dad couldn't see me from behind his desk, so he instantly said, "What the hell was that?"

Now, Bill Trencher could see me and, from my reaction, he immediately realized what I had done. He also knew that, while my dad had his positive qualities, he wouldn't react well to my quixotic and predictably ill-fated experiment with the fan. In fact, both Bill and I knew this was the sort of thing that would make my dad's head explode. He'd be post-facto stressed that I'd done something so dangerous and silly. Because I'd made him stressed, he'd be mad at me, and because he was mad at me, he'd yell at me. In front of Bill Trencher, no less, which would embarrass me and hurt my feelings even more.

But Bill Trencher was a really nice man. And wise. He could have told on me, knowing that my dad's correction would be way out of proportion to my error. Or worse: he could've corrected me himself, which would've meant double the correction: one from him and an outsized one from my dad. But he did neither of those things. In an instant, he sized up how to deal with me and my transgression: he could see that I wasn't hurt so he quickly shot me a glance—a raised eyebrow, a slight but unmistakably warm, empathetic grin—that said, hey kid, you know you shouldn't put your finger in the fan. But it's okay. Don't do it again and your secret's safe with me. And then he told my dad he'd shifted in his chair and that's what made the noise.

They continued their conversation. I kept being bored. I'm positive Bill Trencher didn't give that moment another thought, but I've remembered it for 36 years. Yes, I've never put my finger in a fan again, but that's not what I learned. I learned how correction with empathy, how Solomonic decisions—what gets corrected (and what doesn't) and how and when—make all the difference when it comes to making a lesson last. Especially for HSCs.

4^c— Genuine, strategic praise. Everyone likes to be noticed but not everyone likes to be watched. That's especially true of many HSPs, some of whom will often forego being noticed for something they do well in an effort to lower the risk that people will watch them doing it. So how do you notice someone without watching them? You don't. You do watch. You do listen. You just do it discreetly. And you read between the lines. Then you file it away. The right opportunity for praise will present itself sooner or later. It's worth nothing that I've found discreet praise goes a long way, too, especially with HSPs. I think that's because one-on-one interaction is their preferred method of interpersonal communication. Speaking of which...

5^c— One-on-one instruction. This is an area where the logistical differences of specialty classes and core classes make themselves known. It's somewhat easier for specialty teachers to provide one-on-one instruction because they generally have more time to do it. There's one important and useful tool of one-on-one instruction we all can use, though: written feedback. As such, I think it's really important to think of grading as teaching. On paper. And it doesn't have to be long-winded. In fact, it's better if it's not. Try to keep it:

- **Simple.** This is where prioritized correction comes in. Focus on the most important stuff and let the other stuff go for now.

- **Succinct.** When I'm responding to a poem or story, I give students three things I like about it, a sentence or two covering what I think they're trying to accomplish with the piece, and three suggestions or questions for them to consider in revision. That's it. Any more than that and they're overwhelmed. And I'm a creative writing teacher. Written feedback on a math test can be even more succinct than that. But showing that you've engaged what they've produced enough to provide more than a little red X is, in itself...
- **Supportive.** And there's no better opportunity for genuine, strategic, discreet praise than in your written commentary. (HSPs, for those very reasons, often prefer written praise.) And, again, it doesn't have to be long-winded.

6^c— Familiar routines. Scheduling around this place is subject to all manner of cataclysms and conflicts. We've got a lot going on, all the time. That's clearly not going to change. While our students crave autonomy, I think they equally (if secretly) crave stability and order, too. HSPs in particular don't like change and surprises. The more consistent we can be, the better. When (not if) we need to adjust our schedules, I think it's pretty important that we make it a priority to not add stress. One way to mitigate the stress of a schedule in flux is to reduce the overall workload if at all possible. Another is to get back to the routine as quickly as possible, even if it means adjusting your approach to the material. And, of course, adding unexpected work on short notice is never a good idea. It makes students' heads explode, which can diminish their performance in other classes and their specialty—an unexploded head being a prerequisite for a vast array of cognitive and motor functions.

7^c— Autonomous learning. Here's another area where specialty instruction and core instruction differ somewhat, so my suggestions might not be applicable to everybody. Again: specialty teachers have more flexibility to use class time for autonomous learning. That's somewhat less true for core teachers, who often have more specific material to "cover" and, more importantly, less time per class period. I do think it's useful for all of us to keep in mind that creatively devised, challenging solo activities during class time can be just as useful as small or large group activities (HSPs prefer them), and they don't have to be associated with extended, high stakes projects. Also, if it's possible, try to give your students a couple of different options in the ways they can fulfill a given assignment, even the less-involved, daily ones. And, while I'm no expert in the methodology or

rationale behind the so-called “flipped classroom,” it would seem to offer a more autonomous style of learning for students. Might be worth dabbling in.

8[¢]— Regular access to calm, familiar, inviting spaces. The more you can make your classroom not look and feel like a classroom, the better. The more you can allow your students to avail themselves of the entire campus, the better. Yes, it often feels like we’re herding cats around here, and no, our students aren’t always being “productive” when they’re in the courtyard or the cafeteria or the library or their respective specialty areas. Yes, we always need to know where our students are, and, yes, they’re not always where they say they’re going to be. I do think it’s important, though, to risk giving them as much freedom of movement as possible. It should be a privilege for them, not a right, and a fair number of them will lose it, either temporarily or for good. But most of them will cherish it because it fosters an atmosphere of trust, autonomy, and creative freedom. It also allows them the opportunity to regulate their own decompression throughout the (very long) day, as needed. Their instincts about that are at least sometimes better than ours.

I’ll close with these two simple thoughts. I think they’re very important and I think they’re related:

9[¢]— Resist sarcasm/cynicism. The costs of being sarcastic in front of students far outweigh any perceived “benefits,” especially for HSPs. Two reasons why:

- **By definition, sarcasm involves saying something that is the opposite of what you believe to be true.** For a teacher, that’s always dicey. If a student doesn’t get the sarcasm, they’re probably confused and, as a result, they’re probably self-conscious and they might even feel stupid for not getting it. Even if they do get it, you’ve just subtly (or maybe not so subtly) undermined your credibility and trustworthiness. Not only did you say something you don’t literally believe, you probably did it at somebody else’s expense. Maybe even at their expense. In the process, there’s a good chance you’ve made creative risk and self-expression feel somewhat less safe for somebody. That’s not cool or funny. It’s mean.
- **By nature, sarcasm is mean-spirited and negative.** It’s often rooted in cynicism. Whether it’s the result of a faded emotional scar or an active open sore, something that happened a long time ago or something you’re living through now, cynicism kills the creative spirit. It’s a lowest-common-denominator response to some brand of fear and sadness. At

ASFA, not only are we trying to foster the creative spirit (not kill it), we also have a high percentage of students who have trouble navigating the choppy waters of fear and sadness. I think that's because a lot of them are HSPs, but even if they're not, they're teenagers. We can't model the lowest-common-denominator response for them. Cynicism is absolutely not okay in our students. (For them, it usually and most problematically manifests not as sarcasm but as apathy.) If our students are cynical, if they succumb to some combination of the fear, sadness, and stress that are so often a part of the creative process, they have failed in what we're trying to help them achieve. And so, of course, that's our failure, too.

10^c— Our task is one of persuasion. When I'm thinking about the art of persuasion, I usually gravitate to the three elements of classical Greek rhetoric:

- **Logos.** Logic. Facts. Evidence. HSPs can sometimes be frustrating students in this respect: they're not always interested in the "right" answer, and they don't always connect with subjects (or teachers) that aren't open to different interpretations of the material. With some subjects, that puts you (and them) in between a rock and a hard place. The quadratic equation is the quadratic equation. If your subject matter offers the luxury of different interpretations, try to give your students leeway to be wrong or to hold opinions that are outside the accepted analysis of a text or concept. Engage and encourage their energy while modeling your own method of interpretation, your own process and standard of analyzing information and evidence. Regardless of subject matter, look for opportunities to praise and reward effort and engagement, and try to validate their thought process ("I see how you came to that conclusion..."), even if what it produces flies in the face of convention.
- **Pathos.** Emotional appeals. This one is tricky because while HSPs (and teenagers generally) tend to be open to such appeals and they can be quick to engage them, they're also not in complete control of their emotions, and they tend to feel things more deeply than others might. Of the three rhetorical elements, this one runs the most risk of over-arousal for HSP (and adolescent) students. I think it's best to use it judiciously and always in concert with the other two elements.
- **Ethos.** The credibility of the orator (i.e., your credibility). Increasingly in the classroom, this isn't just about your mastery of your subject matter or your ability to deliver it. It's about demonstrating your curiosity, your consistency, your authenticity, your sense of fairness and empathy, your

willingness to admit when you're wrong or when you don't know an answer. The more you model the behavior you expect from your students, especially the HSPs, the more credibility you're going to have with them. We all have to earn that credibility with every student, every day, and it's crucial to the ASFA enterprise that we do so. The more credible you are, the more persuasive you'll be.

Postscript

How does this apply to Try 101? To "try" in the way I am advocating, it is very helpful to treat your Creative Spirit as if she is a Highly Sensitive Teenager. And it is also helpful to assume the very specific role (the duties and the responsibilities) of her teacher—you are *teaching* your Creative Self as if she is a Highly Sensitive Teenager.

PART III

The Three P's: Practice, Process, Projects

Chapter 1

What It Means to Practice

The Four Tenets of Practice

There are four basic truisms you need to know about making things:

1. **[Writing]* Is Not a Subject Matter.** To borrow an insight from my grad school prof again: there are no formulas, no quadratic equations. There's very little in the way of a standardized set of information or principles. Writing, like any truly creative enterprise is, in fact, a means of uncovering the subjects that mean the most to the artist. In other words, it requires effort and experimentation.

* I've bracketed "writing" because you can substitute any other form of creative endeavor for "writing." Writing is a creative, critical form of thinking. Organizing thought into language that is then shaped (somehow) into something that might be shared with other people. Or not. Language is the medium but it could be paint or food or semiconductors. Or anything else.

2. **[Writing] Is an Act of Connection.** Connection to an audience, of course, whether that's one person or one million of them. But also connection to the subjects that mean the most to you. And, ultimately, therefore: connection to your innermost self. Still more effort and experimentation.
3. **Intention* is Overrated.** If you don't think too highly of your intentions, you create some space for yourself to have a higher opinion of your "mistakes." Your mistakes aren't really failures to execute your intentions—well, they *are* that, but they're also something else, something that's way more interesting and empowering: they're Invitations. Invitations to trust the creative spirit, the unexpected opportunities that always emerge from it, if only you remain open to that particular kind of connection. This is why experimentation is so important: effort with too much certainty can often lead us astray.

* There's a notable irony: I have already indicated that intention is important to practice. This tenet has nothing to do with that. Good practice is when you know you are practicing—you *intend* to practice. This tenet is about intended *outcomes*: products. What your practice produces is often not what you thought it would be.

Get right with that; in fact, embrace it. We're so often lucky that what we get out of our practice is so much more than we put into it.

- 4. Make It Interesting.** At first blush, simply "making it interesting" might seem to be easier said than done. What exactly does "interesting" mean? Who gets to decide? Really it's pretty simple. The best way to be interesting is to be *interested*. Creative people are insatiably curious and passionately invested in the subjects that mean the most to them. That passion and curiosity is infectious. I know a guy who wrote a book about pluots. It's an interesting book, not so much because of pluots (though it turns out they are pretty interesting) but because the guy knows how to be interested in something. If our effort isn't interesting, we should probably try something else.

Practice Is a Noun

A creative practice is a vocation. Not just work but a life's work. It's also a Spiritual Discipline.

Practice Is a Verb

A creative practice is the act of teaching yourself.

Self-Taught Teachers

I have a sneaking suspicion that the best teachers are those who are largely self-taught. You must first, as it were, secure your own oxygen mask before helping others. The question is, how do we teach ourselves to be creative, especially when that seems to involve so much unlearning.

Integrative Medicine ≈ Integrative Teaching/Learning

Here what comes to mind is the notion of Integrative Medicine—made popular by the likes of Andrew Weil and others. It's a both/and model of wellness: there are some aspects of conventional medicine that work well (some that don't), just as there are some aspects of holistic medicine that work well (some, too, that don't). The trick is to toggle back and forth. There's no formula. There's only, fittingly enough, effort and experimentation. Wellness of all types requires us to Try, with every aspect of ourselves, using all the ways we are intelligent.

Howard Gardner and Multiple Intelligences

Howard Gardner is a professor at the Harvard graduate school of Education and he is the pioneer of the concept of Multiple Intelligences. Right off the bat, there's an important distinction to make between Gardner's work and the popular idea of "learning styles." Gardner himself rejects the notion that most individuals learn things better in one particular way or another, but his work isn't really about whether someone learns better visually or aurally or kinesthetically, etc. It's about articulating the many different components of human "intelligence."

More specifically, his work suggests that conventional schools have always privileged two sets of "intelligences" in particular—linguistic intelligence and logical/mathematical intelligence—and they don't give near enough attention to the other seven kinds of intelligence he's identified: bodily-kinesthetic, musical, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, existential, and naturalistic. Gardner believes the different intelligences he articulates work interdependently, and that we're not mining our human resources to their full potential if we don't figure out how (a) to take better advantage of the other "non-academic" kinds of intelligence and (b) to better develop all our intelligences in concert with one another.

The metaphor he often uses to explain the concept is that of a network of computers: each kind of intelligence within one particular individual is its own "computer" and not all computers are created equal. They work differently, some have different software, different memory, different processor speeds, etc. And some just plain work better than others. In order to develop to our fullest potential, we have to learn how to synchronize our network. That doesn't mean you can't improve in a deficient area; it just means our aptitude profiles are jagged. As Gardner points out, Yo Yo Ma just *got* the cello almost right away. His musical learning curve was negligible compared to that of the average person. With all that said, Gardner's particular ideas on *creativity* are very interesting to me, and I think they're particularly pertinent to anyone who wants to better nourish and sustain the Creative Spirit. Here's an extended quote Gardner gave during a Q&A session after a lecture at Harvard:

Creativity is always an interaction between an individual with his or her abilities; what we call a domain of study – which can be music or chess or physics or architecture or law; and a group of judges who decide what's

good and what's not good. And you cannot tell how creative a person is even if you knew about everything in their brain and even if you knew about all their intelligences because you'd have to know about what society they live in, what domains exist that they can work on, and how people decide who gets privileges like getting to go to a school, getting a scholarship, getting their work displayed, and so on.

So we think of creativity as systemic rather than as the property of an individual mind/brain. That said...when I first studied creativity—and I've been studying it for a long time – I really thought it was primarily about your "computers" and how good they were. I have since come to the conclusion that the creative individual – and I'm going to use the word individual here deliberately – is distinguished from other people less by how good the computer is and more by their motivation.

Creative people are people who like to take chances, don't mind falling flat on their face, and when they do, they pick themselves up and they try again. And if I wanted to generate creative people, I would create a society, so to speak, where you can make mistakes and it's okay and if you give an answer that other people don't want, try to understand why, and you give them lots of room to work. As you probably know, 30 or 40 years ago, east Asians were very frustrated because they would do very well on tests but they didn't see people as being creative. So they would come to my office, even 30 years ago, and they would say, "Tell us the 23 things we need to be creative." And I said, "The first thing you have to throw out is there aren't 23 things, it's not an orderly kind of thing. But if you want to generate people who are willing to take risks and be rewarded for that rather than punished, you'd probably have a more creative kind of environment."

I believe that the (so-called) genius of Western culture is consumption. I also believe that we're starting to see the limitations of that brand of genius. A lot of us consume mindlessly. A much smaller number consumes mindfully.

Conventional schools, by and large, don't create the kind of environment Gardner is describing. They exist within a framework of consumerism. Good conventional schools can help create mindful consumers. Most (mediocre and/or bad) schools help create *mindless* consumers. Given a choice, I'd rather consumers be mindful than mindless, and I think there is a place in a healthy society for schools that primarily work toward the former. A sounder understanding of (and commitment

to) the concept of multiple intelligences would help make that happen. But lost in those distinctions is a much more important point, to our schools and even to the culture at large.

As a culture, I think we're not geniuses at creating unique, original things of real intrinsic value outside of the context of consumerism.⁶

⁸Think Steve Jobs. He was a genius at systems and design, and he applied that genius to create a family of elegant products for sale. In his defense, a lot of his products make it possible for other people to create unique, original things of real intrinsic value outside the context of consumerism. Unfortunately, most of us use them to make it easier for us to mindlessly consume still more products and (often trivial) information. More on Mr. Jobs to come in the next chapter...

At least we're nowhere near as clever at that as we think we are. And I think we're getting worse at it – largely because, as a culture, we are growing ever more fearful. Particularly we're fearful of risk and failure. No place is that truer than in our public school systems.

Chapter 2

A Kinder, Gentler Notion of Creative Process + Creative Projects

It's been a while, but let's go back to dolphins. Here's a metaphor/syllogism:

- Leaping dolphins are to the Deep Blue Sea as...
- Creative Projects are to a viable Creative Process.

Work with me, here. (I'll get back to schools in a second.)

A lot of the time, you don't see the dolphins. Sometimes they're not even there, but more times than you know, they're there, swimming around so capably underneath the teeming surface, zooming after krill or whatever, grinning their crooked dolphin grins. Maybe they play a prank or three on some sharks. You know. Just dolphin stuff. But a dolphin's gotta breathe, so periodically she breaks the surface. Sometimes she sort of bobs up, takes a big gulp of air, and goes back down into the weightless, undulating, liquid world in which she was born and where she is always and forevermore most comfortable.

Sometimes, though, the dolphin takes a different approach. Sometimes he starts from way down in the coolest depths, gets up an enormous head of steam, and bursts forth from the water like a shot. And he spins in the air and he laughs and he says, "Hello, Great Wide World, here I am!" Sometimes that happens and no one's around to see it. Maybe just some other dolphins. A stray gull. Sometimes that happens and there's folks around. With cameras! And they put it up on YouTube and it goes viral and we all think: wow, dolphins are really cool.

But it's really easy to forget something important: you can't have cool dolphins leaping up out of the water if there's no water. And lots of it. And what if the ocean was just a big, old tub-o-dolphins? No leaping, that's for sure. Pretty soon, no dolphins. At least not living, breathing ones. And the smell (gross).

The ocean comes first (and foremost). Then come the dolphins. Dolphins that only occasionally leap. Mostly they hang out in the ocean, eat, and make baby dolphins. And of course they raise said babies up to be big dolphins—that might someday, occasionally, leap themselves. Great art—stories, poems, essays, novels, movies, paintings, ballets, etc, etc—are tantamount to those leaping dolphins.

Your creative process—the self-directed reading and watching and listening, the noticing-and-documenting, the generation of lots of materials that never sees the light of day—that’s your fathoms-deep (and also mostly *unfathomable*) ocean.

Also: stories, poems, essays, novels, movies, painting, ballets—they kinda-sorta procreate too. The more of them you make, the more you *can* make. And the more likely one (or some) of them is to decide to leap. Also: not all great stories, poems, essays, novels, movies, choreographers, songs, bands, etc, get noticed. Like those dolphins, they leap up for the sake of leaping alone. They leap up into (and disappear down into) a vast obscurity. But mostly the point is this: if you want leaping dolphins, the best thing you can do is make sure you’ve got a healthy, thriving Deep Blue Sea. Your process is your ocean. Tend to it, and the dolphins take care of themselves.

Don’t get me wrong: dolphins are very cool (sonar receptors in their teeth!), and so are projects. And yet, in my own creative life, I’ve found it way too easy to place too much emphasis on my projects. Especially a certain kind of project. Namely: a project that is—or might be considered—a *product*. I think there are a couple of very powerful cultural forces reinforcing that overemphasis: School and the Marketplace. Interestingly enough, those two forces are part and parcel of each other.

What (Typical) Schools (Typically) Produce

For over twenty years now, I have been studying and/or teaching creative writing in an academic setting. In Europe, where they’ve had universities a lot longer than we have had them in America, this sort of career path (so-called) is mostly unheard of. The phenomenon of the “creative writing program” has taken much longer to catch on in European colleges and universities because the prevailing wisdom there seems to be that creative writing isn’t something that should (or even *can*) be taught in school. Writing, in other words, is not a subject matter.

This is where the intersection of school and markets, particularly in the United States, enters the equation—though admittedly it’s a subtle (some might say ‘insidious’) merging, as opposed to a stark crossroads. In the space of the next few paragraphs, I’ll try my best to give you the ersatz history of contemporary American public education.

Public school as we know it is rooted in the Industrial Revolution, specifically because (A) child welfare laws of the late 19th century all but eliminated children from the industrial workplace (thereby creating a problem: how *in the hell* do we keep all these kids off the street?) and (B) an industrialized society demanded a steady supply of consumers and workers with a relatively standardized set of knowledge, values, skills, and abilities.

In other words, conventional American schools (as originally conceived and still currently constructed) are largely designed to prepare young people for successful integration into the marketplace—as producers and consumers. Not only that, these schools are themselves (increasingly, unabashedly) structured by the rules, concepts, demands, and values of the marketplace: students as both commodities and consumers; teaching and administration as a public relations exercise; the buzzword/buzz-saw of efficiency—often efficiencies *of scale*; the common pitfall of incorporating new technology for its own sake; a slavish emphasis on “measurables,” “deliverables,” “standards,” etc.⁶

⁹ This probably isn't the place (nor am I the person) to dive into the topic of whether or not most of our schools are actually even very good at this. For what it's worth, I don't think they *are* very good at it, and I think they're probably getting worse at it. But, again, other people—Seth Godin, Sir Ken Robinson, and Howard Gardner, et al—have already articulated compelling arguments as to why that is and what we should be doing instead. Seek them out, if you're interested.

For its sake, the university system as we know it, particularly the public university system, really took shape in response to the explosion of new enrollment following the passage of the GI Bill after WWII. More students, more classes, more professors, more degree programs, more alumni, more buildings. Not to mention more tuition, more donations, and more corporate-academic partnerships (a.k.a., “synergies”), particularly in the area of research and development. It's a veritable positive feedback loop, and the bottom line is, well, the bottom line.

What's more, it wasn't so much about a rarefied pursuit of knowledge; it was more about training folks for gainful employment, specifically middle management. The concept of American schooling, then, from grade school through college and beyond, has been profoundly shaped—if not wholly created—by the market forces of supply and demand.

“Learning” to Be “Creative” in a “Marketplace”

That is nowhere more evident than in the rise of the American creative writing program in the second half of the 20th century. The original (and still most prestigious) creative writing program—anywhere in the world—is the Iowa Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa. It opened its doors in 1936. Turns out, that was perfect timing: just as the American university system was set to become a booming growth industry, there was a critical mass of Iowa Writers’ Workshop graduates who had master’s degrees in creative writing and who could use their Iowa experience as a template to develop new creative writing programs in other colleges and universities throughout the United States.

All of that is to say: In 1936, there was (roughly) one creative writing program. In the entire world. Today, there are well over 300 such programs (and counting) in the United States alone. Supply, meet Demand.

The celebrated American novelist Cormac McCarthy—not himself a product nor a direct beneficiary (per se) of what I like to call the Literary Industrial Complex—once said teaching writing is a hustle. By that I think he meant that it’s all an elaborate ruse set up by writers who can’t make a living at their craft. They’ve convinced university administrators to effectively create a system of patronage, whereby the writers teach a few popular college classes nine months out of the year to impressionable young undergraduates and graduate students alike. Maybe they publish well, win a Pulitzer, bring positive attention to the university. Or not. In return, these writers receive a living wage, health insurance, and old-age pensions. Otherwise, they mostly just get left the fuck alone. Win-wins all around. Not only that, this system has evolved to meet another far more pressing need. Every college student has to take a few English classes, starting with English Composition. More college students means more Comp classes, which means you need more Comp teachers.

Who are you going to get to teach all those Comp classes (classes, mind you, most English professors hate teaching and most college freshman hate taking)? More important, how are you going to pay them to do this thankless and yet essential task? Keep in mind: plumbers get a decent wage to do difficult things that (A) other folks really, really don’t want (or know how) to do and yet (B) really, really have to be done anyway. But if you’ve got a small army of inexperienced, impressionable graduate students who, for the most part, lack credentials—and who are angling to emulate their mentors (i.e., “writers who can’t make a living at

their craft”) by taking their eventual place in the firmament of the Literary Industrial Complex—there’s a chance you can pay them subsistence wages and they might gladly take your thorny problem off your hands. You might not even have to give them health insurance.

And that’s pretty much exactly what’s happened. Most sizeable public universities would be totally screwed if there wasn’t a large and constantly replenished pool of graduate students to teach entry-level courses in the humanities (among other disciplines), and that is nowhere more true than it is in English departments. But that’s just the economics angle.

The Professionalization of Creativity

There’s also the whole Workshop Model itself and how it has influenced our relationship with what we call (literary) art. Without getting too theoretical, let me just say that something happens when an artist—a poet, let’s say—submits a work-in-progress to a small group of ten or fifteen people whom he (A) knows fairly well but (B) didn’t directly choose herself. It’s a weird situation. Maybe the poet has, say, been naked with one or two of the other people in the room, or maybe they’re roommates and the poet always leaves her gross food-caked dishes in the sink. Maybe two or three of the people in the room *fucking hate* (and/or are in desperate unrequited love with) the poet. Or. You know. Whatever interpersonal hell we often make for ourselves, especially if we’re poets.

That’s a charged human situation. It could (and does) get *very awkward*.

The general remedy is to focus *exclusively* on the work. It’s a thing, a product. The artist is ostensibly removed, isn’t even allowed to make a peep throughout the whole ordeal. Everybody just talks about the work itself, as if it appeared out of nowhere. It’s just a thing. A thing we can consume and then talk about. Maybe that makes a workshop easier or better, but it probably doesn’t make it easier or better to make art.

And then those things we make for workshop, their ultimate value is as potential bullet points on a resume and/or bibliography—i.e., publications—that can help us take our place in the firmament, either as Famous Writers Who Don’t Have to Teach or, far more likely, as not-so-famous writers who *do* have to teach but who are at least gainfully employed doing something that doesn’t feel like a job.⁷

¹⁰ Obscure Entry-Level Tenure-Track Job Teaching Creative Writing (and Comp, etc.) at the Local Public College/University ≈ Assistant Manager Job at a Place Where They Manufacture and/or Distribute Obscure Widgets (or in The Service Industry). Unfortunately, the market for teaching writers is now glutted. This process has created way more qualified creative writing teachers than there are gainful creative writing teaching positions. The jig, as it were, is mostly up. The (so-called) Academic Job Market is an absolute sham. (He says bitterly.)

Admittedly, it's not that way for all creative people. It's not even that way for all writers. But it's that way for a lot of us, and I know—from my own experience and from direct observation—that the whole sordid process can really mess with your head if you're not careful. If you're not careful, the Thing becomes the only aim. If you're not making a viable Thing, well, then you're just not a writer and/or creative person at all and you suck and you should basically just shut the hell up and go, I don't know, do whatever it is that uncredentialed, suck-ass failures do. Watch TV or something. I don't know.

And as I say: that's messed up. I've seen that attitude kill (or else at least *severely maim*) the Creative Spirit in far too many gifted creative people. I'm not advocating that we remove the creative enterprise from schools or markets entirely, mostly because I think it's too late for that but also because I don't think schools and markets are inherently evil. They serve a purpose. Clearly I have benefited, materially and otherwise, from the trine of creativity, school, and the marketplace. Which is to say: I like school and I like creativity. Also I like money.

That particular trinity isn't inherently *spiritual*, though, either. Far from it, in fact. For that reason, I know—*feel*, really—that I need to be very conscious of the role these large cultural (mostly secular and, yes, ultimately economic) forces play on my own interaction with the Creative Spirit. It's particularly crucial for me to keep in mind the essential functions of the Creative Spirit, and to invite them to complement each other in my creative practice as best they can. Which is to say: I think it might be good for anybody who wants to cultivate the Creative Spirit to do the same.

The Genius and the Madman

As an example of these different functions—roughly, what Lewis Hyde calls the market exchange vs. the gift exchange—let's detour out of academia for just a little bit and do a quick compare/contrast between two creative people who, at first, seem to have lived very different lives and come to very different ends.

The Genius: Steve Jobs

We'll start with Steve Jobs, whose story is so well known as to have become some kind of Digital Age creation myth. Given up for adoption at birth, Jobs was an iconoclast almost from the very beginning. He epitomized the self-taught, DIY outsider: he attended Reed College in Portland—already itself a bastion of liberalism and outside-the-box thinking—only to find even its loose strictures too confining. He proceeded to bend the curriculum to his sensibilities, gladly forgoing official degree-seeking status (along with steady meals and a reliable place to sleep) so that he could ricochet from class to class, discipline to discipline, listening to lectures and making his own set of ligatures to link them into an eclectic but cohesive set of principles that would eventually underpin what is arguably the most dynamic and influential brand of products in human history.

Somewhat less well known but also well documented are Jobs's personal idiosyncrasies, many of which made him a difficult man to get to know and love. He had an eccentric relationship to eating and bathing, for instance, and his attention to detail—often cited as his truest vocational trademark—really reflected a kind of mania that was almost certainly rooted in a Howard-Hughes-like obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Likewise, his interpersonal style was unusual, often off-putting, and at times even offensive. Even—or especially—to those closest to him. Folksinger Joan Baez, whom Jobs dated for a time, tells the story of a high-priced dress Jobs had seen and thought would suit her—a thoughtful gesture, to be sure. They went to the shop to see the dress together, and when Baez tried it on, Jobs told her he thought (A) she did *indeed* look great and (B) she really should splurge and buy it for herself. This from a man who (A) brought the dress to her attention in the first place and (B) had a net worth measured in the billions. Needless to say: (A) Baez didn't buy the dress and (B) that relationship didn't last. So. Yes. Obsessive-compulsive. Self-absorbed. Perhaps a touch of Asperger's. Under other (far more common) circumstances, Jobs might have been relegated to the fringes of society, to a life spent on the outside looking in.

In other words, he might have ended up like Henry Darger.

The Madman: Henry Darger

Like Jobs, Darger was an outsider from the beginning. Born in 1892, his family splintered when he was just a boy, probably for economic reasons but also perhaps because young Henry was not the easiest child to raise. As a result, Darger spent much of his childhood in an asylum/orphanage and he had very little contact with his real family. Throughout his life, he had few friends and meager prospects for anything approaching a “normal” life, much less the American Dream of abundance epitomized in someone such as Steve Jobs. When he was sixteen, Darger settled in Chicago, where he found work as a janitor in a school. For most of the last 43 years of his life, he lived quietly and alone in a small room in a boarding house. He died in 1973.

The few people who knew him—knew *of* him—saw him as a weird old man who kept to himself. And, you know, he *was* a weird old man who kept to himself. But that’s not all he was. Upon his death, when the landlord went into Darger’s room to complete the unenviable task of clearing out his effects, he discovered what was more a jam-packed art studio than a recluse’s spartan living quarters. There were hundreds, if not thousands of drawings, paintings, mixed-media murals. There was a 10,000-page (typed, single-spaced) episodic novel, complete with alternate endings—one happy, one sad. All of this creative energy was devoted to a single narrative structure, one in which a plucky band of cherubic sisters fights the forces of evil and endeavors to save the world once and for all. Just by virtue of the sheer volume of his output, it’s clear that Darger must have spent every free waking hour he had on the project. For decades.

Admittedly, the images and the accompanying novel are strange and unsettling, with their pervasive expressions of violence and what seems to be a just as pervasively repressed (a.k.a., creepy) confusion regarding sex and gender. Henry Darger was not a normal, well-adjusted man. Neither, it could easily be argued, was Steve Jobs. Decidedly unlike Jobs, Darger died penniless and anonymous, misunderstood and more or less unhinged. But like Jobs, Darger is something of a posthumous icon himself—albeit in the considerably smaller world of outsider art. Darger’s landlord, himself a knowledgeable art collector, could see through the odd subject matter—after all, there’s lots in, say, the average Hieronymus Bosch to make us wince. Not unlike the editors of the strange and reclusive Emily Dickinson, the landlord took it upon himself to bring Darger’s life’s work into the light of day.

It turns out Darger wasn't so much a technical virtuoso. Many of the images in his pictures are traced or transferred from photos and other drawings. He was, however, ingeniously innovative in the ways he mixed media—drawing, painting, water colors, transfers, clippings—and his natural inclinations for color combinations, image composition, and overall design were impeccable. What's more, he had no formal training. All of this he taught himself through painstaking trial, error, and relentless repetition.

Darger's work has been displayed in museums all over the world, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Individual pieces have fetched six-figure sums from private collectors, and he has a devoted cult following, especially among artists, musicians, and assorted other misfits, for whom the man, his work, and the myth surrounding the symbiosis of the two provide an explicit testament to the sustaining power of the Creative Spirit.

Much of that also applies to Jobs, whose genius was less sourced in his ability to create something that didn't exist before and more in his ability to see how existing disparate elements—mixed media, in fact—go together in vital new ways, and in his relentless (obsessive) attention to detail and design. That Jobs and Darger—a “genius” and a “madman”—have a good bit in common is interesting and even instructive, but those similarities are not so much why I've considered these men (at some length) here. I honestly don't aspire to be like either one of them, nor would I want my students (or my son) to aspire to be like them. Jobs's net worth aside, I believe both men led difficult lives that were animated by forces (a.k.a., personal demons) they could *barely* control. To their credit, they channeled those forces into creative output, but I suspect even that output was more likely the tangible residue of affliction than it was a transcendent gift of the Creative Spirit.

I'm still mostly interested in how these two guys were *different*. Not in a worldly (therefore: obvious) sense. In a creative sense. That leads us (finally) back to the functions of our creative output—two functions in particular: one (for lack of better terms) extroverted, one introverted.

The Extroverted Function

It's hard for me to fathom the degree of shamelessness and ego that possessed my creative spirit for far too long (and that still, periodically, grips me). Shortly after I had moved to Birmingham to teach at ASFA, I had coffee with some

friends from my graduate program who were up for the day from Tuscaloosa. Both of them were (are) writers, none of us had yet published a book, and both of them were seeking jobs as tenure-track professors in writing or literature. Like me, they were varying degrees of desperate to publish a book, but their rationale was different from mine. "You already *have* a job," one said to me that day. "What are you worried about?" I was, for a moment, stunned silent by the question. The other "emerging writer" in our party answered for me: "He wants to make a name for himself as a writer." At the time, I couldn't imagine how any young writer couldn't understand that having yet to publish a book was a source of consternation for any other young writer. But we weren't really talking about the same thing.

My friend was talking in market terms, as (in fact) was I. But they were different markets. My friend needed a book publication because that was the coin of the realm in the academic job market. Now, I think his market obsession is much more defensible than mine was. Markets are about filling voids. There's an open tenure-track position; you fill it. Seen from the perspective of the applicant: he has a job-sized void in his life; he needs to fill it. His CV has a hole in it – he has to publish a book – so he frets until he does. (Both of the friends in question have gone on to publish multiple books, to some considerable acclaim, and they both teach in large universities.) But I didn't have those kinds of voids to fill—as my friend rightly pointed out. I had a good job teaching creative writing, one that would never require me to publish a single word as a means to keep my job. My voids were more personal, more ego-driven. I wasn't ashamed to say "the world" "needed" "my" "art." There was a book-shaped void in the world: only I could fill it. I can see the arrogance in that attitude now. I was blind to it then.

The Introverted Function

Because it's worth quoting again at length, here's Allen Ginsberg:

The parts that embarrass you the most are usually the most interesting poetically, are usually the most naked of all, the rawest, the goofiest, the strangest and most eccentric and at the same time, most representative, most universal... That was something I learned from Kerouac, which was that spontaneous writing could be embarrassing... The cure for that is to write things down which you will not publish and which you won't show people. To write secretly... so you can actually be free to say anything you want... It means abandoning being a poet, abandoning your

careerism, abandoning even the idea of writing any poetry, really abandoning, giving up as hopeless—abandoning the possibility of really expressing yourself to the nations of the world. Abandoning the idea of being a prophet with honor and dignity, and abandoning the glory of poetry and just settling down in the muck of your own mind...You really have to make a resolution to write for yourself..., in the sense of not writing to impress yourself, but just writing what your self is saying.

Ginsberg is advocating for an audience of one (yourself). He's advising privacy and eschewing prophesy. The creative function is not always a communal one. Its gifts are gifts we give ourselves.

It's rarely necessary for those gifts to be shared. And by that I mean to really emphasize the word *necessary*. There is no emptiness in the world that needs to be filled by something I create. The void isn't anywhere else but inside me. The emptiness is in me.

What's more, that void is necessary—it's one I don't particularly want to fill, at least not all the way. I believe the Creative Spirit is interested in not filling space but making it. In those spaces—silences, solitudes—we can be renewed. We can heal ourselves. In those spaces—to reference the well-known admonition regurgitated by flight attendants at the start of every flight—we are able to secure our own mask before assisting others. In those spaces, we do the necessary work of tending to ourselves.

There's Value to Both Functions

Of course, there are times when it *is* necessary for you to share your gifts. Your gifts yield insights the world can use. Or maybe just one or two other people in the world need those insights, but still: it becomes necessary to fill a real and demonstrable void outside yourself. In my experience (limited though it is) the world tends to come after you when it needs your gifts. And it's often not the gifts you, yourself, value—or gifts you wish the world valued. In those cases, though the impulse will be to turn inward, it's actually stingy not to share.

There's Trouble When the Two Are Conflated/Confused

And that, perhaps, is the point I'm trying to make: we often don't know which is which. When am I to be "introverted" and when am I to be "extraverted" with my

gifts? The short answer is, I don't know. I have a clue though: when your gifts are frustrating you, ask yourself if you've conflated or confused whether it's true function is "introverted" or "extroverted." Often it will be the opposite of what you expect: you will write the Great [American] Novel and, instead of awards, accolades, and advances, it will yield you a set of priceless, intimate insights into some private heartache you haven't let yourself feel. On the other hand, you will utter what you thought was a silent prayer, and the person behind you in the supermarket line will, with tears in his eyes, say "Amen."

Another Way to Know Which Is Which

Trust your process, and remind yourself it's really not necessary for you to decide which is which. Most of what you do—80%, let's say, or more—should not be product-oriented. This is not what you make; it's how you live. Here's how that breaks down for me:

The 80%: Chronic. Extended. Chaos.

For me, reading is nourishment. This is true for all writers. For other creative forms and media, the nourishing act might be different. Drawing, let's say, for visual artists—even those who work in three dimensions or with other tools (paint brushes, print blocks, etc). Scales for a musician. I don't know. Whatever helps you train your eye, your ear, your creative muscles (literally, figuratively).

Then you also have to generate. For a writer, that means making words. For a musician, it means making music. For a painter it means painting. (You get the point.) It helps to do this regularly. Some people need to be pretty regimented in this regularity—every day, same time, same place, you put in the time. If that notion of work "works" for you, know that about yourself and your process, and honor it. Show up, do the work, grind it out. There's lots of people for whom that notion doesn't work at all. It really makes them feel like shit, in fact. And it gets in the way of them generating. Those people are often well served by broadening their notion of what it means to "generate"—what counts as generated material. For writers, a journal entry, a blog post, a letter/email, a gratitude list—these can count. Break it down. Make words. Did you make words today? And did you read? Well, then, you did it.

Either way, this generation stage is almost always chaotic. And it almost never comes to closure—not in any finite way. Yes, you stop—after five minutes or 5000

words. But you're not "done." You're never done generating, just as you're never done nourishing yourself.

Here's where I think in terms of what people like Andrew Weil call "Integrative Medicine." Weil's a proponent of mixing and matching Eastern and Western approaches to health and wellness. Western medicine does better with acute conditions: broken legs, heart attacks, brain tumors. It's usually not as good at chronic conditions.

What if we were to think of creativity as a chronic condition, then? (Work with me here.) In medicine, chronic conditions are often better treated by lifestyle adjustments and other holistic treatments. "Holistic"—as in the whole organism is an integrated system, where body, mind, and spirit work in tandem. Where one element is out of whack, the others will overcompensate and eventually get out of whack too.

What I have found is that reading and writing—how I nourish my creative self and what it generates—are, in fact, holistic treatments for my overactive mind and my restless spirit. These two interrelated creative activities help me to be in balance. It's a place to put my chaos.

Also: the metaphor of nourishment—feeding—yields to a metaphor of excretion—shitting. And that's about right. There, the verb—to shit, to have shat—is far more valuable and satisfying than the noun—the smelly turd itself, which you flush away as quickly as you can.

The 20%: Refine. Polish. Finish.

This unfortunate metaphor breaks down considerably unless we shift to some other organic process. (Checks notes...) Pearls! Right, a pearl is made of excretions too. It's a natural response to some irritant. Often, I gather from the internet, a parasite—not a grain of sand. Something, that is, that aims to live off the host organism, suck the life out of it, if it can. And so the host coats it many times over in nacre.

Maybe our projects are like this. To defend against what is truly eating at us, we make a thing. Layer after layer. It takes time. No one's watching. What we make may or may not be perfectly round. We're not making it for perfection, not at first. We're making it because something's eating at us. Only after a while does

this thing that's eating at us stop being a parasite and start to become a (possible) (semi-precious) gem. This requires a new way of looking at it. "Hmm. This thing isn't quite round. But it could be." It requires a little obsession, a little compulsion. It also requires that you know when to stop. One my writing teachers used to say, "It's never done. But it is due." He was talking about term papers; I think our creative projects are probably due like newborns. There's a time when they're ready for the world, after which they will invariably grow into what they were truly meant to be—and that last part (the growing-into-what-they-were-truly-meant-to-be part) is largely out of your control.

But how do you know when it's due (finished)? Another thing I don't know. I think, generally, I like to believe I finish my projects, but it might be more accurate to say they finish with me. Again, I don't know for sure. It will often be hard for you to know for sure too.

I can only tell you what I find myself asking myself:

What counts as a whole thing? In other words, how *small* can I make it, especially if it doesn't have to be measurable in the first place? Then again, how big can I make it? What if I wait a year? Or five years or ten? What will I know then that I don't know now? (All of my books have taken years to draft and re-draft. In all of them, I entered into refine/polish/finish mode too soon. More than once. They were all served by tossing them back into the ocean, to get bigger, stronger, better, more alive.) What if I stop and write something else? (Sometimes writing making something new is the only way to know you're not quite finished with another something; it creeps its way into the "something new" and it turns out you're really just re-seeing the project that isn't finished with you.) Do I have to share it? (Sometimes you write a novel to tell yourself something you didn't know you needed to hear.) If I do have to share it, does somebody have to pay me for it? (The answer to this question is usually no.)

What happens if I (gulp) give it away?

If I give it away—if, more crucially, I'm *willing* to give it away—well, then, maybe it truly is a gift. And maybe it's ready for the world. And maybe, just maybe, it's worth something. Maybe, just maybe, it's something I need to share.

PART IV

Try 101: The Syllabus

I. Course Texts

You have the rest of your life to do the reading.

—Joseph Campbell, to one of his students at Sarah Lawrence who complained that the reading list on his syllabus was too long.

One of the ways I (try to) make sense of things is through reading books, and I develop a strong attachment to a particular book if its insights help me at least intuit the underlying nature of things. I'll read and re-read, earmark and return to passages, more like scripture than just a regular old book that you read and put back on the shelf. While my reading style can be a little obsessive, there's a meditative quality to reading this way, and it's generally served me well. It is, I believe, the style of reading Joseph Campbell was advocating to his students. Reading as an extended relationship with seminal (if not sacred) texts, not as a transaction of extraction and/or accomplishment. Here, then, are some of the seminal books that have helped me develop the Try 101 mindset.

The Highly Sensitive Person: How to Thrive When the World Overwhelms You and **The Highly Sensitive Child: Helping Our Children Thrive When the World Overwhelms Them** by **Elaine Aron**. Don't take my synopsis for granted. There's lots more I didn't get to cover, including (in *The Highly Sensitive Child*) a chapter on parenting a Highly Sensitive Child, which would surely be of interest to at least some of you—particularly if you buy the hypothesis that your inner Creative Spirit is best understood as just such a highly sensitive child.⁸

¹¹ If you suspect yourself (or someone you love or like or at least someone you need to consistently conjure the better version of themselves) to be an HSP, here's a practical list, "Top Ten Survival Tips for the HSP" by Susan Biali, M.D. in *Psychology Today*:

1) Get enough sleep. Lack of sleep (less than 7 hours, for most people) is well known to produce irritability, moodiness, and decreased concentration and productivity in the average person. Given our already ramped-up senses, I'm convinced that lack of sleep can make a highly sensitive life almost unbearable. Getting enough sleep soothes your senses and will help you cope with an already overwhelming world.

2) Eat healthy foods regularly throughout the day. Aron points out that extreme hunger can be disruptive to an HSP's mood or concentration. Keep your

edgy nerves happy by maintaining a steady blood sugar level through regular healthy well-balanced meals and snacks. I also take fish oil (omega-3) supplements daily as the brain loves these, lots of studies support their beneficial cognitive and emotional effects.

3) Wear noise-reducing headphones. A boyfriend introduced Peltor ear protecting headphones (usually used by construction workers, not pre-med students) to me when I was 19 and studying for exams. No matter where I am in the world I have had a pair with me ever since. HSPs are highly sensitive to noise, especially the kind we can't control, and my beloved headphones give me control over my personal peace in what's all too often a noisy intrusive world.

4) Plan in decompression time. HSPs don't do well with an overly packed schedule or too much time in noisy, crowded or high pressure environments. If you know you're going to spend a few hours in a challenging environment—such as a concert, a parade, or a crowded mall at Christmas time—know that you're likely to be frazzled after and will need to decompress somewhere quiet and relaxing, on your own if possible.

5) Have at least one quiet room or space to retreat to in your home. If you live with others, create a quiet safe place you can retreat to when you need to get away from people and noise. This could be a bedroom, a study, or even just a candlelit bath (or shower if that's all you have!). I've found it often helps to listen to quiet relaxing music as well, this can even drown out more jarring external noise when you need it to.

6) Give yourself time and space to get things done. I mentioned above that HSPs don't do well with a packed schedule. I've managed to structure my work life so that I work afternoon/evening shifts the days I'm at the medical clinic. This way I'm able to get out of bed without an alarm, eat a calm unrushed breakfast and putter around before getting down to business. The calm this gives me carries through my whole day. Another strategy for those who work in the morning might be getting up extra early (after 8 hours sleep, of course) to enjoy the quiet before the rest of the household wakes up.

7) Limit caffeine. HSPs are sensitive to caffeine—I usually can't even handle the traces of caffeine found in decaf coffee. If you're a coffee drinker (or dark chocolate junkie) and identify with the HSP trait description, giving up the joe might be a big step towards feeling more collected and calm.

8) Keep the lights down low. I've never liked bright lights and learning about HSP helped me understand why. Minimizing light stimulation goes a long way: I only put on low lights in the evening, and prefer to shop in certain local grocery stores which have gentle mood lighting, avoiding the garishly lit, crowded "big box" stores whenever I can.

9) Get things done in off hours. To avoid crowds and the associated noise and stimulation, I've learned to live my life outside of the average person's schedule. I grocery shop late in the evenings, run errands during the week whenever I can, go to movies on weeknights, and go out for my walks before the rest of the world hits the jogging path. An added bonus: by avoiding the crowds I usually get things done faster and almost always get a parking spot!

10) Surround yourself with beauty and nature. Since we HSPs are so sensitive and deeply affected by our surroundings, envelop yourself with beauty and calm

whenever possible. I've decorated my home simply in a way that's very pleasing to my eye, with minimal clutter and chaos. I also spend as much time as I can walking in nature, enjoying the quiet and its naturally healing and calming beauty. **For the full article:** <https://bit.ly/30SP6kP>

Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences and Five Minds for the Future by Howard Gardner. Again, Gardner pioneered the theory of Multiple Intelligences, and this is the seminal book articulating the theory. He's not talking about learning styles; he's talking about the variety of ways people are gifted and the importance of helping students recognize and fully develop their specific aptitudes. Gardner believes that conventional schooling only addresses a couple kinds of intelligence, namely the ones associated with reading, writing, and arithmetic—he calls them linguistic intelligence and logical/mathematical intelligence, respectively. But Gardner sees other crucial intelligences: kinesthetic, spatial, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Later in his career he added two more: environmental and spiritual. Also later in his career, he wrote about what he calls "Five Minds for the Future"—the Disciplinary Mind, the Creative Mind, the Synthesizing Mind, the Respectful Mind, and the Ethical Mind. My very rough sketch of those what occupies these Minds: expertise, originality, the ability to make good connections, honoring others' rights, and accepting responsibilities.

The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything by Sir Ken Robinson. When it comes to discovering what you're truly passionate about, it boils down to four questions: Do you get it? Are you good at it? Do you want it? Where is it? This, too, articulates a rationale for what we do at ASFA. (I mean, it's got "Passion[!]" right there in the title.) Our students have an innate, in-depth understanding of their specialty area, they're exceptionally good at it, they want to get even better at it, and we provide the place for them to do that. It's that simple. At ASFA, our students are in their element. Their element is here and nowhere else. But read the book because it's mostly about why the process of finding our passion, and inhabiting our "element," is so important for all of us to undergo (and keep undergoing)—and it has nothing to do with being 15 and knowing what you want to do for the rest of your life.

The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World by Lewis Hyde. Gifts are for giving, and that's true for our personal gifts, too—the things we're good at. Hyde argues that the free exchange of creative gifts, in particular, is crucial for the health of any culture. By turning our creativity into a commodity (property to be bought and sold, a process to be commercialized), we restrict the flow and

growth of our collective imagination. As a letterpress print in my office would indicate, I agree: the print says “The essence of art is generosity.” One thing I'd add to the gift exchange concept is that teaching is also a gift exchange, a symbiotic back-and-forth between teacher and student. The essence of teaching is generosity, too.

Letter's to a Young Poet by Rainier Maria Rilke. I love this book for its sheer intensity and for its paradoxical combination of narcissism and selflessness. On the one hand, Rilke is ostensibly responding to fan mail—a series of unsolicited letters from a novice poet named Franz Xaver Kappus—by waxing philosophical about his own existence. There is the sense of journaling to this work, a certain note-to-self nature that, at times, seems to bypass Kappus and his concerns entirely. On the other hand, how magnanimous of Rilke to engage Kappus, a neophyte-stranger in need, with the full faculties of his poetic thought, with the intense energy he otherwise guarded jealously, fearing even his own family would devour it if given half a chance. Regardless of Rilke's motivation, the letters are full of cross-cultural, interdisciplinary wisdom and insight. Not unlike Shunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, it's ostensibly about being a beginner, about always being new to the world. Interestingly, that idea is not, itself, new to the world. Thus sayeth, for example, the Book of Mark:

*And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all."
(10:13-16)*

Rilke too gets at a (maybe?) complementary concept—the essential agelessness of things:

Being an artist means: not numbering and counting, but ripening like a tree, which doesn't force its sap, and stands confidently in the storms of spring, not afraid that afterward summer may not come. It does come. But it comes only to those who are patient, who are there as if eternity lay before them, so unconcernedly silent and vast. I learn it every day of my life, learn it with pain I'm grateful for: patience is everything!

Clearly that advice isn't for everyone, and because I haven't read many Franz Xavier Kappus poems, maybe it either fell on deaf ears or Franz took it to heart and decided that all that unsayable navel-gazing—not to mention the relentless, edifying pain for which he was supposed to be grateful—just wasn't for him. Which is fine. Not everybody—thank *God* (or goodness, anyway)—is a poet.⁸

¹² One of my teachers in poetry school used to say that one of the most important things an MFA program can do is help people realize they *don't really* want to be writers. It's a lot to ask of yourself and the people you love. I don't want to put *too* fine a point on any of that, just because it gets tiresome even to somebody who takes himself as seriously as I do: *O the crushing burdens of the artiste in an indifferent Universe!* I'll leave it at this: through trial and a good deal of error, I've come to the following realization: by definition, art and artists are abnormal. Weird, even. There's all that aforementioned self-absorption that seems to go with the territory, but just practically speaking, to put all those words on the page (or paint on a canvas, etc.) you need a lot of quiet time alone. Quite frankly, if you can comfortably live a "normal" life, surrounded by nice, "normal" people with cool stuff and fun activities, you probably should go ahead and do it.

Traveling Mercies by Anne Lamott. Also *Bird by Bird*, which is a book about writing, among other things. Really anything by her, though her books can get a little redundant in terms of what she writes about—her recovery from alcoholism; her faith, her funky little church in California; her beloved alcoholic father who died young(ish) of brain cancer; her frustrating neurotic mother who lived to a ripe old age with lipstick on her teeth; her only son, whom she had out of wedlock and semi-intentionally, in her late thirties; her politics, her dogs; her travels; her many obsessive-compulsive foibles, the fleeting moments of transcendence that sustain her. Etc. It's her voice, really. I don't worry too much over what she's writing *about*. I find reading her to be like channeling my late mother, who was a complicated and lovable and damaged but also (in her complicated, lovable, damaged way) very wise soul. Lamott presents the raw, sometimes even ugly versions of herself, and while she kicks herself a lot, she seems pretty good at forgiving herself too. I'm not so good at forgiving myself, but I want to be better at it, so it helps to see how somebody else does it.

True Love: A Practice for Awakening the Heart by Thich Nhat Hanh. Not because you need help opening your heart. Your heart is open. This is a well-established fact. And a wide open heart is the goal, so you're ahead of the game (ahead of me, for sure). That's why you're so special. I think "open" and "awake" are slightly different things, though. To be sure, "open" is a necessary prerequisite to "awake." Most of us don't quite get to "open." Some don't even try. But "awake" is the right way to be "open," the only path to open-wide, wide as the

Cosmos, wide as—wider than—anything any of us can imagine. So open that even your hurts—past, present, future—become the path to pure Love. Because of how open you are now, I know you can get to open-wide. The Big-Love kind of open-wide. This book can encourage you towards it.

Just Kids by Patti Smith. Because of labors of love, true love, Big-Love, open-wide. Love that transcends romance. And circumstance. Also because of art.

Man on Wire. This is the documentary film accounting of tightrope artist Phillippe Petit's monumental life achievement: walking a tightrope strung between the two towers of the World Trade Center. If you've already watched it, watch it again. For inspiration. Chill bumps. Tears come to my eyes every time Petit steps out on that wire for the first time. In conjunction with that: *Let the Great World Spin*, a novel by Colum McCann. Set in NYC, 1974. The day Philippe Petit walked out on the wire. For a reminder that other (quieter, more private) extraordinary things are always happening in the ordinary world below sky-high feats of derring-do.

Wild by Cheryl Strayed. Another kind of intensity and adventure, though perhaps it's a complementary kind. After a divorce and the death of her mom, Strayed set out to hike the Pacific Crest Trail from southern California all the way to Canada. Alone. On a kind of vision quest or something. Kicker being she never really even day-hiked before, much less hiked the whole entire Pacific Crest Trail, which is the west coast equivalent of the Appalachian Trail. It winds through the Sierra Nevadas, which is where the infamous Donner party met its grisly fate. (Oh: and she was maybe kinda-sorta trying to kick a slight heroin habit at the time.) So she was in *no* condition to try something like this. She easily could've died and nearly did on one or two occasions. She did it anyway (with some necessary midstream adjustments to her itinerary) and lived to write a book about it. I suggest you read it not only because I think her story would interest you but because her writing style is very much like yours. You could definitely write books like this. Books that are honest, books that inspire, books that make you want to turn the page. (PS: Don't do heroin. Or hitchhike, which she does a lot in the book. And if you go on a really long hike, which you'd probably enjoy, you know, like, do some training or something beforehand.)

The Artist's Way by Julia Cameron. A (maybe *the*) classic guide to creativity and the creative process. You respond well to books like this (you may even have this one already?), and I think this one would really speak to you. As would Twyla Tharp's *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It For Life*.

The books [you] loved as a child. For me, a creature of the late 20th Century, that means books by Beverly Cleary (the Ramona books are classic, as are the Henry books), Judy Blume (*Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret; Then Again, Maybe I Won't; Tales of a Fourth-Grade Nothing*), and Katherine Paterson (*Bridge to Terabithia*). This is what I was reading—loved reading—as a kid. I sure as hell wasn't reading Tolstoy or Thomas Pynchon then (and, to be honest, such heavy-lifting literary reading isn't always my natural inclination even now—if I had to pick between reading *Anna Karenina* or *The Crying of Lot 49* and re-reading *Tales of a Fourth-Grade Nothing* for the millionth time, it would be no contest). I like these books and these writers from my childhood because they are so human and they spoke to my experience as a neophyte on Planet Earth. More than anything, they inspired me to read (and *re-read*, which might be even more important), and they made me want to write, though I didn't take up that inspiration until I was in college. Such books—age appropriate to your generation—tap into something that was new and previously untapped in us; something I suspect is *always* new and untapped in us. Something essential and vital. Revisiting these texts reacquaints us with this essential vitality. It does me, anyway.

“Rough Crossing: The Cutting of Raymond Carver” by Simon Armitage.⁹ This is a *New Yorker* piece about the permeable wall between writer and editor—in this case Carver and Gordon Lish, whose influence on Carver's work was profound and somewhat controversial. I think this article is especially pertinent for you because you bring such good skills to the table from either side of that wall, and you could well find yourself on either side of it at various points down the line.

¹³ Link: <https://bit.ly/2GIVZBL>

Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking by Susan Cain. Because if you're quiet by nature, if you're a contemplative who listens more than you speak, I think the world needs the likes of you, and this book might help you strategize your way into the fray.

Bento's Sketchbook: How Does the Impulse to Draw Something Begin? by John Berger. Berger is a painter, a writer, a critic, a farmer, and all-around bon vivant. If your talents and interests are interdisciplinary, you will likely find inspiration in his work and overall career. At any rate, the ink drawings in this book are great, particularly the technique of smudging the ink for shading and

color. Produces a nifty watercolor effect. And its toggling back and forth, from journal-like musings, extended quotations of the philosopher Spinoza (aka, “Bento”), and drawings is a great model for a commonplace book. But that’s not necessarily why I hold this book to be “sacred.” It’s for a pearl of wisdom it offers regarding stories—the ones we tell others, the ones we tell ourselves. Here it is:

There are two categories of storytelling. Those that treat of the invisible and the hidden, and those that expose and offer the revealed. What I call—in my own special and physical sense of the terms—the introverted category and the extroverted one. Which of the two is likely to be more adapted to, more trenchant about what is happening in the world today? I believe the first.

Because its stories remain unfinished. Because they involve sharing. Because in their telling a body refers as much to a body of people as to an individual. Because for them mystery is not something to be solved but to be carried. Because, although they may deal with sudden violence or loss or anger, they are long-sighted. And, above all, because their protagonists are not performers but survivors.

...

The heartfelt hopes, once exemplified in triumphant Hollywood stories, have now become obsolete and belong to another epoch. Hope today is a contraband passed from hand to hand and from story to story.

There may, in fact, be no better expression of the animating spirit behind Try 101.

II. Course Objectives

- Maintain a kinder, gentler, more expansive definition of **Practice**.
- Identify and honor our **Process(es)**.
- Bear **Projects**—wide-eyed, pink, bleating—into the world. (Or not.)

Try 101 is for anyone who wants to tap into the Creative Spirit. You probably want to make things. Worthwhile things. Things for you. Things for others. Maybe you’re not too worried about making “Something in Particular” or you’re not that interested in sharing what you make with the world at large. Or maybe it’s fine by

you if you do, and it's fine by you if you don't. Regardless, there's a very good chance you want to strike a better balance—in your life, in the world—between creativity and consumption. That very likely means adding more of the former and subtracting some of the latter.

Newsflash: that's *hard*. But it's the work of the Creative Spirit. And the Creative Spirit has the power to transform, transcend, transubstantiate. You know that. Or else: you know that if Try 101 is the place for you.

Our Vocabulary: Practice, Process, Projects

Practice. Practice is what we do around here. Yes, "practice" can mean, like, soccer practice or piano practice, etc. Something you do regularly with the ultimate aim of getting better at it. Depending on what that something is, we can get into that kind of practice. Getting better at something can be fun (as long as you really want to get better at it). But there's also the "labor of love" angle, the spiritual pursuit the word practice can suggest. The cool thing we've discovered is that the two kinds of practice aren't mutually exclusive. In fact, our favorite kind of practice helps us to do both: to get better at something we want to do well and to feel closer to something larger and more numinous than ourselves. (Win-win!)

Process. Not all creative processes are the same. In fact, individual creative processes are subject to change over time. Process can be hard to define, hard to talk about, because it's not always tangible. It's a set of conditions, a climate, an ecosystem. Remember: it's not the swimming fish; it's the ocean they swim in.

Projects. To keep the metaphor going, projects are the swimming fish. The ocean can exist without the fish, but the fish can't exist without the ocean. If you want healthy fish, it stands to reason you better have a healthy ocean. But, oddly enough, the metaphor only goes so far: not all successful projects are the result of a healthy, sustainable creative process, and a healthy, sustainable creative process invariably produces an awful lot of sick-fish projects bobbing sadly on its undulating surface.

Here's what we think about that crazy paradox: we value the Creative Practice above all, because the Creative Practice reflects and feeds the Creative Spirit. We think the best way to strengthen your Creative Practice is to forge an ever more balanced, more sustainable relationship between your process and the projects it

spawns, to commit to the belief that the two can—and should—nourish each other. All our workshops are designed to help you make that commitment. To your process. To your projects. To yourself.

Our Tools*

A big part of our effort/experimentation involves noticing and documenting the world around us. Our whole bodies do that sort of noticing, of course, but we'll be trafficking mostly in words, sounds, and images. Eyes and ears are particularly suited to noticing sounds, images, and words, so our tools reflect that focus.

To do your documenting you'll need the following:

- A notebook or commonplace and writing instrument(s)

Also helpful:

- A camera
- A tape recorder
- A laptop (optional)

* In this day and age, a cell phone has the capacity to be all these tools in one. That will do in a pinch. But consider, too, disconnected, non-digital tools: pen and paper; disposable cameras; Polaroids; cassette recorders; etc. They tend to work a different part of the creative consciousness, if not (literally) different parts of the brain.

Our Practices

30 Things I Love Right Now is a meditation. A practice of gratitude and love. At its most basic and heartfelt level, the practice is pretty simple, and it can inform your whole Practice:

- Write a list of 30 things you love right now.

It might not seem hard to come up with 30 Things You Love Right Now. But, you know, sometimes it really is. And if you try to do it on a semi-regular basis—especially if you try to come up with 30 *NEW* Things You Love Right Now—well, you're constantly having to look at The Glass half-full. And you're also having to ruminate on a lot of the things that have, of late, captured your imagination. So it

can be a challenge. A good challenge, but a challenge nonetheless. The important thing to remember is there's no *wrong way* to do a 30 Things. "Right Now" is a flexible concept too. (Last week is close enough.) As is "Love." Heck, so is "30," though there is something strangely perfect about that number. It's not insurmountable but it's usually not *easy* either. Kind of like 90 feet between home plate and first base, or 14 lines and 140 syllables to a sonnet.

In the process of crafting a list of 30 Things, the problem/opportunity of Craft might creep in. You're just cruising along, minding your own business, making your mundane list ("...15. Blueberry Pop Tarts... 16. Pez candy... 17. Lizzo...") and then, all of a sudden, #18 requires that you tell a story or at least provide some context. Because it's not so much a tangible thing but a feeling or an ambiguous experience. Or something. But it seems very important and, of course, you really love it right now, so it has to be in your list *right now*. You quickly get immersed in telling the story or articulating the feeling, so you start really laboring over words and images (sounds, even!) and before you know it, you're trying to make it *good*. Like, fit-for-public-consumption good. But that wasn't the point. It was just supposed to be this ad hoc Spiritual Exercise or something. *You're not supposed to care if it's good.*

But, then again: *sure you are*. If you start caring to make it *good*, that's awesome. Go for it. Make it good. But you don't *have* to make it good. You never have to make it good. The genius of the 30 Things is its versatility. It can simply be a meditative exercise for you and only you (you never have to *share* your 30 Things if you don't want to). Or it can be that *and* an art form in itself. Or somewhere in between. Again, there's no wrong way to do it.

Free Writes. You may have been asked to do this in an English class at some point in your life. The idea is to just get words on the page. The only rule is you can't stop writing. If you can't think of anything to write, you just write nonsense or repeated phrases until something new sparks.

- A variation on this theme is the **focused free write**, in which you start with a given word or phrase and write whatever comes to mind. If you lose your train of thought, you go back to the word or phrase and repeat it until your mind starts to move in another direction. Items on a 30 Things list work well for focused free writes.
- A non-textual variation on this theme is the **blind contour drawing**, which is the visual arts equivalent of free writing. You don't have to be

“good at drawing” to do it, either. It’s not about producing a piece of art. It’s about looking at things more closely—it’s about being more conscious of how and what you see.

Notes-to-Self are real-life excerpts of resurrected insight from real-life notebooks. Read through your old notebooks and commonplace books. What does your former self still want you to know?

Pilgrimage. Go, for a time, to a place where you feel called. You’ll know where. It’ll be obvious. If you want to make art as you go, make art as you go. If not, don’t. Do notice. Be open. Be more conscious about how you see. Try to document. Somehow. (When in doubt: a 30 Things list can work wonders.)

A variation on this theme:

- **Flâneuring.** Take an hour or two to wander around. Technically, I think, a flâneur wanders through an unfamiliar city. But the important thing is the wandering (preferably by foot). Alternate routes and landscapes are fine—make like a Romantic and wander lonely as a cloud through nature, or wander through a city or subdivision that is intimately familiar to you. Take a creative tool with you (notebook, camera, tape recorder, sketchbook). Document what you see.

III. Homework (Optional)

What follows are some specific prompts, mostly writing-related. There's nothing magic about them. They're designed to get you to engage your Creative Spirit, and some of them might end up helping you produce things (stories, poems, essays). They use words as the creative medium. Even if you don't see yourself as a writer, there are prompts here that can be useful to you—particularly the journal prompts. That said, if you don't see yourself as a writer, I would still invite you to try your hand at a few of the other prompts (nonfiction, fiction, and poetry)—in the spirit of Try = Effort + Experimentation.

Journal Prompts

Here are some ideas to get you started writing in a journal or commonplace book:

- **Make a list of your current Preoccupations.** Persons, places, things, activities that have a hold on your mind, body, spirit, and/or imagination. Update the list once a month.
- **Make a list of 30 things you love right now.** Big or small or in between. The first 30 things that come to your mind. Update it weekly (or more often than that). PS: This is a good place to go mining for your Preoccupations.
- **Freewrites.** Focused or not. You can write for a set amount of time or give yourself a set amount of pages to fill.
- **Interview yourself.** Write out the questions AND the answers. Make it a back-and-forth, where the interviewer (you) works off the responses of the interviewee (also you) in an organic, extemporaneous way. Keep it going over several sittings spread out over several days, weeks, months.
- **Draw the cartoon version of said interview.** Or a portion of it.
- **Draw a functional map in your notebook.** A real or imagined place. Write labels and a key that references a character (real or imagined) and suggests a narrative. Leave some stuff out.
- **Fill a page—the WHOLE page—in your notebook with the names of places in the world where you've NEVER been.** Be imaginative and specific. Peru is a place. So is Lima. So is the inside of a blue whale's ear. Write big. Write small. Write in all kinds of different directions on the page. Maybe also in different colors. If you feel like it.

- **Fill a page—the WHOLE page—with the names of places in the world where you HAVE been.** Be imaginative and specific again. Etc.
- **Fill a page or two (or ten) of your notebook with pictures of one of the objects or places on your list of Preoccupations.** Draw. Trace. Cut-and-paste. Whatever.
- **These are things that you might want to put in there on a regular-ish basis:** song lyrics; quotes (from famous people and/or your friends and family); whole passages of books you love and/or hate; language you happen upon: in stores, driving down the highway, at temples and churches and mosques, in classrooms and doctor's offices, on the boob tube, the interwebs, etc; color copies of family photographs; black and white copies of family photographs; (copies of) copies of black and white copies of family photographs; stencils; and/or etc. (Don't forget [blind contour drawings](#).)

Nonfiction Prompts

Allow me first to direct you to [some notes about what nonfiction is](#). Keep in mind that any of the following prompts could be a quick-hitter of, say, a page or two and/or they can all be tricked out to take up 2,500 or 50,000 words or more.

- #1. **750-Word Autobiography.** Write a short essay about who you are in the here-and-now. Try to focus on a specific place or object or rite of passage (or perhaps some combination thereof)—as opposed to trying to tell your entire life story.
- #2. **Fan Letter.** In 1903, a 19-year-old student named Franz Kappus wrote what amounted to a fan letter to his favorite poet. He also sent him some of his own poems, asked him if he'd let him know what he thought. The poet in question was [Rainer Maria Rilke](#), who was **A**) making a name for himself as a rising star in the world of poetry at that time and is **B**) now considered one of the most important/influential poets of the 20th century. What resulted from Kappus's initial letter—much to Kappus's delight and surprise—was a back-and-forth correspondence that lasted five years and ultimately became [Letters to a Young Poet](#). (If you want to, you can read the letters on-line [here](#).) I want you to take a page from Franz Kappus's book and write a letter to a living artist you admire. Doesn't have to be a poet. Could be a novelist or a story writer. Could be a musician or a dancer or a director. Etc. And this person doesn't even have to be famous—Rilke had published a couple of books by the time he

received Kappus's letter, but he wasn't RILKE yet. (Kappus knew of him mostly because they went to the same school, though they weren't there at the same time.) The artist you choose doesn't have to be a megastar. Just as long as this artist's work inspires you in a real way in the here and now. Consider this [interview with the musician Glen Hansard](#) who, when he met [Bob Dylan](#), engaged him in conversation about their shared love of [Woody Guthrie](#). If you can't think of a particular connection, feel free to go in search of one. Hint: interviews, reviews, bios, and liner notes are good places to start. You don't HAVE to find such a connection but the chances are, if this person's work moves you in a real way, this sort of connection is probably there somewhere.

- #3. **Explanatory Essay.** Write an essay that explains how something works or how something happened. Take the opportunity to be humorous and/or ironic.
- #4. **Experiential Essay.** Write about a unique experience you've had, preferably something you did with the express intention of writing about it later. Don't do anything dangerous or illegal.
- #5. **Food Essay.** Evoke place (and/or the character of a real life person or persons) through writing about food.
- #6. **Travel Essay.** Write an essay about a trip to some noteworthy place that's foreign to you. Keep in mind that "noteworthy" is a bendy term. A lobster festival in Maine is noteworthy. Paris is noteworthy. So is Andalusia, Alabama.
- #7. **Photo Essay.** Make a photo essay of a relatively common place—someplace a lot of other people wouldn't really find beautiful. Write an in-depth companion essay-ish shard sort of thing, in which you bombard the page with all your linguistic/lyrical powers. Make it "artsy." Make it beautiful.
- #8. **Family Essay.** Write a family story, preferably one that has more than one version. Try to express—explicitly or implicitly—what role this story plays in your family's identity.
- #9. **Place Essay.** Write a personal essay that evokes a particular place and that fully characterizes the people in it.
 - Pick a place where you have some history but where you can also return for a while to sit and observe (AKA: notice and document). Try, also, to find a place that is peopled.
 - In the process of this noticing, evoking, and characterizing, try to reveal something about yourself—but do it obliquely. Don't come

right out and say it. Instead, try to let the things you notice and the way you convey them do the work of this personal revelation.

- Also: maybe this is a [lyric essay](#)?

#10. Profile Essay. Let's start with [an example](#). From the NYT. It's about singer/songwriter Katell Keineg. Our world abounds in profiles, especially on television, especially of people who are considered celebrities. You encounter them all the time. Your task is to profile somebody who isn't a celebrity. Someone in your general sphere of existence. The first trick is to notice an interesting person—What's interesting about this person? What do you think you already know about her/him? What do you want to know more about? Then spend time with this person. Preferably on different occasions, in different settings. Write about the experience. Period. That's it. It's okay—in fact, it's *encouraged*—for you to be in this essay too. You don't have to tell this person's entire life story—in fact, it's *discouraged*. Focus. Tell a specific story that captures something essential about who this person is. Please *do* include actual quotes from this person. (A tape recorder would be a big advantage.) The rules of dialogue apply. Fold it into the narrative.

Fiction Prompts

Allow me first to direct you to [some useful notes about what fiction is](#). As with the nonfiction prompts, any of the following could produce a quick-hitter of, say, a page or two and/or they could yield a much longer piece of writing.

- #1.** Take a walk. Notice something that's out of place and use it to spur a story/vignette.
- #2.** Write a story/vignette in the form of a letter.
- #3.** Write a story/vignette that starts or ends with an explosion.
- #4.** Write a story that centers around something shiny, round, and blue. Perhaps a character has lost this shiny, round, blue thing. Or perhaps he or she covets it.
- #5.** Random Dictionary Word Prompt: Flip open a dictionary and point to a random word. Read the definition, even if you think you know what the word means. Use it in the first sentence (or somewhere else) in your story. If you don't like the first word you flip to, flip to another page and point to another random work. Use THAT word instead.
- #6.** Remember that shiny, round, blue thing from above? This time cut it in half with one half going to a character you've already established and the

- other going to a character you introduce in this story.
- #7. Write a story in which the following three settings feature prominently: a barbershop, a convenience store, and a field.
 - #8. Start a story or a scene with a meticulous description of someone cooking something simple for themselves to eat.
 - #9. Set a story or scene in the year of your birth in the city or town where your mother either **A**) was born, **B**) graduated from high school, **C**) married your father. (Keep in mind: you and/or your mom need not have any direct role in the story.) Be sure to write something that could have happened in no other place, at no other time. Write in third-person POV, using past tense. Write at least 300 words.
 - #10. It's Thanksgiving night (or well after the ball has dropped on New Year's Eve). The guests have gone home. The house is quiet. Find the story.

Revision Prompts

Wholly re-see (i.e., revise: [Origin: 1560–70; REVĪSERE to look back at, revisit, freq. of REVIDĒRE to see again;]) something that you've written during this semester using one (or all) of the following strategies:

- Flesh out one of vignettes or scenes you've written in response to one of the prompts above. Turn it into a full-length short story.
- Start with a climax you already have and write a new story. For instance, if you were Flannery O'Connor and you wanted to apply this strategy to "[A Good Man Is Hard to Find](#)," you would start your new story with the grandmother meeting her demise at the hands of the Misfit. In that case, the whole focus of the story would probably have to shift to the Misfit and his crew. (Of course, the mark of a great climax—like O'Connor's in "A Good Man"—is that it feels so final. The idea of "what happens next?" is a moot point. The trick here will be to find a climax that feels a little squishy to you.)
- Change the point of view—from first person to third person or vice versa. Or if you're feeling crazy, change the POV to second person.
- Condense the action so it all takes place in the space of a day. Or less. Don't be afraid to cut characters and settings.
- Change the setting of the story to Birmingham, Alabama, in the present day. Which is to say: expressly and conspicuously put the story in a place and time you know like the back of your hand.
- Count the words. Divide by two. Cut the number of words in the story by that number. (E.g., 2,500 words divided by 2 = 1,250 words.)

- Count the words. Multiply by two. Add that number of words to the story.
- Tack 500 new words onto the very end of the story. What happens? Do you have to keep going? Do you have to cut something? Do what you have to do.
- Write the story again, this time from the perspective of a minor character.
- Eliminate all adverbs and adjectives. By “all,” I mean **ALL**. Replace abstractions with concrete nouns and verbs. Things and actions. Try to eliminate ANY instance of ANY form of the verb TO BE. Use third person, past tense. No sentences longer than fifteen words long. No punctuation other than periods and commas. (You can use up to two question marks, but only in dialogue.)

Poetry Prompts

Here are [some ways to think about poetry](#). Now here are a few prompts:

- #1. Read some [sonnets](#)—here are some by [Shakespeare](#) and [Millay](#). Now write a sonnet. It should be 14-lines long and use at least three of the other distinguishing features of the form: iambs, pentameter, rhyme scheme, volta, octave, sestet, quatrains, couplets, love. Here’s the trick, though: whatever you do, be specific. Use interesting nouns and verbs. Avoid abstractions—especially if you’re writing about an abstract concept (i.e., love). [Bonus: Memorize one of the Shakespeare sonnets or one of Millay’s sonnets. Recite it publicly.]
- #2. Object Poems. Read three object poems: “[Archaic Torso of Apollo](#)” by [Rainer Maria Rilke](#) (he of Franz Kappus/[Letters to a Young Poet](#) fame); “[Ode to a Large Tuna in the Market](#)” by [Pablo Neruda](#); and “[The Fish](#)” by [Elizabeth Bishop](#). Now find and consider an interesting object.
 - **After Rilke:** Write a sonnet in which you use the first twelve lines to describe your object in great detail using lots of sensory images. Nouns. Verbs. Similes. Metaphors. Then use the last two lines to change the focus entirely—either to the speaker of the poem (“I”) or the reader (“you”).
 - **After Neruda:** Write a poem that’s directly addressed to your object. Use at least thirty short lines (one to three or four words each). Be

celebratory. Make big imaginative leaps with your metaphors and similes.

- **After Bishop:** Write a poem in one long stanza in which you tell the story of how you discovered/caught/obtained your object. While you're at it, describe the object in great detail, including the things about it that you can't know or see, and imagine all the places it's been before it came to you.
- #3. Consider two photos: one of you when you were much younger and one of a place that holds a lot of memories for you.
- Imagine that you could go back in time and give the younger version of yourself advice based on all the things you know now. Put it in a poem.
 - Write a poem about something in the periphery of one of your photos.
 - Write a poem in which you walk through the place in your photo. Don't explain the significance of the place. Use your descriptions to show the significance.
- #4. Read this about [Ekphrastic Poems](#). Now find and consider an image of a piece of art located on one of the following museum websites: [The High Museum](#) in Atlanta, [the Birmingham Museum of Art](#), [the Museum of Modern Art](#) in New York, or [the National Gallery](#) in Washington, DC. And, okay, if you're really feeling fancy: [The Louvre](#) in Paris. Now pick one or several of the following prompts:
- Write about the scene or subject being depicted in the artwork. Maybe imagine a story behind what you see depicted in the piece. Perhaps relate it to something else it reminds you of.
 - Write in the voice of a person or object shown in the work of art. The person or object can address the reader or another character/object in the piece.
 - Speak directly to the artist. Try to speculate about why he or she created the work and/or imagine what was happening while the artist was creating the piece.
- #5. Read some [Walt Whitman](#). Now write a long poem (30 lines or more) with long(ish) lines. Use the comma as your dominant mode of punctuation. Feel free to keep going with one of your preoccupations. (One of Whitman's was most certainly America and the idea of democracy.) You can also follow Whitman's example by making your poem a kind of "oratorical" address. Repetition/refrain is always nice.

- #6.** Read some [Emily Dickinson](#). Dickinson rather famously once wrote, “If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know THAT is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know THAT is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?” For Dickinson, a poem was/is a thing that makes you FEEL a certain way. What it “means” is less important than how it makes a reader feel.
- #7.** Read some [Elizabeth Bishop](#). Now pick one of the following:
- Invent your own form, a la “[Visits to St. Elizabeths](#).”
 - Write a long(ish) narrative poem about a particular real-life experience. Don’t be prosaic—limit your line lengths and pay attention to sound (alliteration, repetition, rhyme, etc.). Here’s the key: REFLECT. Also: OBSERVE.
- #8.** Read some [Lucille Clifton](#). Now pick one of the following:
- Write a poem with “sparse punctuation and a lean lexicon of rudimentary but evocative words.”
 - Use direct, ordinary language to write a poem about transcending an everyday human difficulty. (Pick a difficulty you know well.)
- #9.** Read some [Li-Young Lee](#). Now write a long—not long(ish); LONG: at least three pages—love poem that includes at least two different loves, two different KINDS of love.
- #10.** Read some [Rita Dove](#). Now pick one of the following:
- Write a dream poem.
 - Write a history poem. With a real life historical figure in it. Make it a personal poem—meaning one that focuses on the figure’s personhood as much as it does her/his historical significance.
 - Write a poem called “Adolescence I” or “Adolescence III.”
 - Write a poem with two fictional characters in the early stages of love.
 - Write a poem about loss: a loss of faith, a loss of identity, a loss of love.

Revision Prompts

Wholly re-see (i.e., revise: [Origin: 1560–70; REVĪSERE to look back at, revisit, freq. of REVIDĒRE to see again;]) something that you’ve written during this semester using one (or all) of the following strategies:

- Add 50 lines to the end of the poem. Seriously. 50. Just keep going. Don’t worry about going on a tangent. If you’re doing it “right,” you’ll

end up in a completely new place. Do you have a new poem? Two new poems? The first or last line for seven new poems?

- If it's 25 lines or less, double it.
- If it's 25 lines or more, cut it in half.
- Add two extra syllables to each line. You can add lines but you can't subtract them.
- Make the first line the last line of a new poem **OR...**
- Make the last line the first line of a new poem.
- Make it a **sonnet** or a **ghazal** or a **sestina** or a **prose poem**.
- Make each line the same number of syllables. You can add lines but you can't subtract them.
- Cut 3 syllables from each line. You can cut lines but not add them.
- Take out all the adjectives and adverbs. Count them. Add at least half that many new verbs and nouns to the poem—without adding any new adjectives or adverbs. Articles, prepositions, etc, are okay, but don't go crazy with extra language. Keep it to mostly new nouns and verbs.

IV.

30 Things to Do If You're Bored or Stuck

- #1. Go for a walk.
- #2. Read a book or a magazine.
- #3. Write out (preferably by hand) your "30 Things I Love Right Now."
- #4. Take a ten- or twenty-minute nap.
- #5. Talk to somebody who you don't normally talk to. Talk for at least twenty minutes. Don't gossip and don't be mean. Or maybe talk to somebody who you *do* normally talk to but talk about something you *never* talk about. Don't talk for more than fifteen minutes. Again: don't gossip, don't be mean. Talk quietly. [Note: These talks can involve passing notes.]
- #6. Open the dictionary to a random page and read every entry. Write a journal entry using the most interesting dictionary entry as a touchstone.
- #7. Copy down a poem or a prose passage or a song you love. Word for word. In its entirety. By hand. Try memorizing it.
- #8. Draw something. Maybe your hand. Maybe it's a blind contour drawing.

- #9.** Make a collage.
- #10.** Start a dream journal.
- #11.** Stare out the window.
- #12.** Go to a live performance.
- #13.** Sing or play an instrument. It's fine to do this badly.
- #14.** Read another book or a magazine.
- #15.** Go make a cup of tea.
- #16.** Drink the cup of tea you just made. Slowly. *Very* slowly. Don't do anything else while you're drinking the tea. Just drink the tea.
- #17.** Do some pushups. Or jumping jacks.
- #18.** Fill a page with a "mantra." Any "mantra." This doesn't have to be something some enlightened yogi might say. It can be something Bart Simpson might say. It's more about the repetition. With that said, try to avoid cynicism or negative self-talk. (See p. 43-45 for some potential mantras to use.)
- #19.** Write a letter to Slightly Future You asking for advice. (Hat tip: fluentself.com)
- #20.** Write a letter to yourself from Slightly Future You. It can be about anything.
- #21.** Write out the lyrics to your favorite song from memory. Use the hand you don't normally write with.
- #22.** Name everything in your immediate vicinity.
- #23.** Stare at a map. Any map. Then try to draw it from memory.
- #24.** Count backwards from 1,349.
- #25.** Hold your breath for ten seconds. Release it. For fifteen seconds.
- #26.** Write out the five hardest things about right now. What's useful about what sucks?
- #27.** Write a bad poem or song.
- #28.** Pray, but not freestyle. A received prayer—like the Lord's Prayer, the Serenity Prayer, or some other one. The faith tradition doesn't matter. It's not even important if you believe what you're saying. Praying in this way is, for me, is a kind of spiritual free-writing.
- #29.** Meditate. Or else just be very, very still and very, very quiet. Notice that you're thinking and what you're thinking about. [Note: You don't have to do anything about it. Just notice it.]
- #30.** Breathe in through your nose to a count of four. Hold it for a count of seven. Breathe out through your mouth to a count of eight. Repeat that process four times. (Hat tip: Dr. Andrew Weil)