

The Practice



Shipping
Creative
Work

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THIS IS MARKETING

SETH GODIN



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Shipping, because it doesn't count if you don't share it.

Creative, because you're not a cog in the system. You're a creator, a problem solver, a generous leader who is making things better by producing a new way forward.

Work, because it's not a hobby. You might not get paid for it, not today, but you approach it as a professional. The muse is not the point, excuses are avoided, and the work is why you are here.

Lost in all the noise around us is the proven truth about creativity: it's the result of desire—the desire to find a new truth, solve an old problem, or serve someone else. Creativity is a choice, it's not a bolt of lightning from somewhere else.

There's a practice available to each of us—the practice of embracing the process of creation in service of better. The practice is not the means to the output, the practice *is* the output, because the practice is all we can control.

The practice demands that we approach our process with commitment. It acknowledges that creativity is not an event, it's simply what we do, whether or not we're in the mood.

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Sculptor Elizabeth King said it beautifully, “Process saves us from the poverty of our intentions.”

Learn to juggle. Draw an owl. Make things better. Without regard for whether it’s going to work this time. The practice will take you where you seek to go better than any other path you can follow. And while you’re engaging in the practice, you’ll honor your potential and the support and kindness of everyone who came before you.

1. It's Possible

This is a book for people who want to lead, to write, or to sing.

For people who seek to teach, to innovate, and to solve interesting problems.

For people who want to go on the journey to become a therapist, a painter, or a leader.

For people like us.

It's possible. The people who came before us have managed to speak up, stand up, and make a difference. While each journey is unique, each follows a pattern—and once you see it, it's yours.

We simply need to find the courage to be more creative. The forces that are holding us back have long been unseen, but we can see and understand them and begin to do our work.

The practice is there if we're willing to sign up for it. And the practice will open the door to the change you seek to make.

2. The Pattern and the Practice

Our lives follow a pattern.

For most of us, that pattern was set a long time ago. We chose

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to embrace a story about compliance and convenience, the search for status in a world constrained by scarcity.

The industrial economy demands it. It prods us to consumption and obedience. We trust the system and the people we work for to give us what we need, as long as we're willing to continue down the path they've set out for us. We were all brainwashed from a very early age to accept this dynamic and to be part of it.

The deal is simple: follow the steps and you'll get the outcome the system promised you. It might not be easy, but with effort, just about anyone can do it.

So we focus on the outcome, because that's how we know we followed the steps properly. The industrial system that brainwashed us demands that we focus on outcomes to prove we followed the recipe.

That priority makes sense if the reliable, predictable outcome really matters and the payoff is truly guaranteed. But what happens when your world changes?

Suddenly, you don't always get what was guaranteed. And the tasks you're asked to do just aren't as engaging as you'd like them to be. The emptiness of the bargain is now obvious: you were busy sacrificing your heart and your soul for prizes, but the prizes aren't coming as regularly as promised.

The important work, the work we really want to do, doesn't come with a recipe. It follows a different pattern.

This practice is available to us—not as a quick substitute, a

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recipe that's guaranteed to return results, but as a practice. It is a persistent, stepwise approach that we pursue for its own sake and not because we want anything guaranteed in return.

The recipe for recipes is straightforward: good ingredients, *mise en place*, attention to detail, heat, finish. You do them in order. But when we create something for the first time, it's not as linear, not easily written down.

This new practice takes leadership, a creative contribution—something that not just *anyone* can produce, something that might not work but that might be worth pursuing. It's often called “art.”

The industrial system we all live in is outcome-based. It's about guaranteed productivity in exchange for soul-numbing, predirected labor. But if we choose to look for it, there's a different journey available to us. This is the path followed by those who seek change, who want to make things better.

It's a path defined by resilience and generosity. It's outward focused, but not dependent on reassurance or applause.

Creativity doesn't repeat itself; it can't. But the creative journey still follows a pattern. It's a practice of growth and connection, of service and daring. It's also a practice of selflessness and ego in an endless dance. The practice exists for writers and leaders, for teachers and painters. It's grounded in the real world, a process that takes us where we hope to go.

This practice is a journey without an external boss. Because

there's no one in charge, this path requires us to trust ourselves—and more importantly, our *selves*—instead.

The Bhagavad-Gita says, “It is better to follow your own path, however imperfectly, than to follow someone else's perfectly.” Consider the people who have found their voice and made a real impact: their paths always differ, but their practices overlap in many ways.

At the heart of the creative's practice is trust: the difficult journey to trust in your *self*, the often hidden self, the unique human each of us lives with.

See the pattern, find your practice, and you can begin to live the process of making magic. Your magic. The magic that we need right now.

3. Are You Searching for Something?

Most of us are.

If we care enough, we keep looking for that feeling, that impact, that ability to make a difference. And then we look harder.

Followers aren't searching. They're simply following in the footsteps of the people before them. Do well on the test, comply with the instructions, move to the next rung.

Leaders seek to make things better, to contribute and to find firm footing. The chance to make a difference and to be seen and respected, all at once.

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That search has created our culture and the world we live in. More and more people, engaging and contributing, weaving together something worth building.

Let's call it *art*. The human act of doing something that might not work, something generous, something that will make a difference. The emotional act of doing personal, self-directed work to make a change that we can be proud of.

We each have more leverage than ever before. We have access to tools, a myriad of ways forward, and a real chance to contribute.

Your part matters. Your art matters.

It's worth reminding yourself that the question isn't "can I make art," because you already have.

You have already spoken up at least once, contributed something that mattered. You've said something funny to a friend or perhaps even sold out Carnegie Hall.

And now we need you to do it again. But more so.

The real question is: "Do I care enough to do it again?"

As John Gardner wrote, "The renewal of societies and organizations can go forward only if someone cares."

4. Askıda Ekmek

Askıda ekmek: there is bread on the hook. It's an ancient tradition in Turkey. When buying a loaf at the local bakery, you can

choose to pay for an extra loaf and, after bagging your purchase, the owner will hang the second loaf on a hook on the wall.

If a person in need comes by, he or she can ask if there's anything on the hook. If so, the bread is shared, and the hunger is relieved. Perhaps as important, community is built.

When you choose to produce creative work, you're solving a problem. Not just for you, but for those who will encounter what you've made.

By putting yourself on the hook, you're performing a generous act. You are sharing insight and love and magic. And the more it spreads, the more it's worth to all of those who are lucky enough to experience your contribution.

Art is something we get to do for other people.

5. Finding a Practice

Do you have a creative hero? Someone who regularly leads, creates, and connects? Perhaps they're a dancer, a recording artist, or a civil rights lawyer. In every field of endeavor, some people stand out as the makers of what's next, as the voices of what's now.

Here are some to get you started: Patricia Barber, Zaha Hadid, Joel Spolsky, Sarah Jones, Yo-Yo Ma, Tom Peters, Frida Kahlo, Banksy, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Bryan Stevenson, Liz Jackson, Simone Giertz, Jonas Salk, Muhammad Yunus, Rosanne Cash, Greta Thunberg, John Wooden, Amanda Coffman—

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living or dead, famous or not, there are change-makers in every corner of our culture.

With few exceptions, the careers and working processes of every one of these artists are similar. Their output is different, the circumstances are different, and the timing is different, but the practice remains.

We can adopt a practice as well.

Maybe we don't need an industrial-strength recipe for what it means to do our jobs. Maybe instead of a series of steps to follow, we'd be better off understanding how the world actually works now.

We can adopt a practice. Here are the surprising truths that have been hidden by our desire for those perfect outcomes, the ones industrial recipes promise but never quite deliver:

- Skill is not the same as talent.
- A good process can lead to good outcomes, but it doesn't guarantee them.
- Perfectionism has nothing to do with being perfect.
- Reassurance is futile.
- Hubris is the opposite of trust.
- Attitudes are skills.
- There's no such thing as writer's block.

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- Professionals produce with intent.
- Creativity is an act of leadership.
- Leaders are imposters.
- All criticism is not the same.
- We become creative when we ship the work.
- Good taste is a skill.
- Passion is a choice.

Throughout this book, we'll keep returning to surprising truths like these that fly in the face of what we've been taught about productive work in a system based on compliance and recipes. Artists have been shunned or shamed for embracing them, but that's because these truths work. They subvert the dominant power structure while at the same time they enable us to make things better for the people we seek to serve.

6. Learning to Juggle

I've taught hundreds of people how to juggle. Learning requires a simple insight: catching the ball isn't the point.

People who fail to learn to juggle always fail because they're lunging to catch the next ball. But once you lunge for a ball,

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you're out of position for the next throw, and then the whole thing falls apart.

Instead, we begin with just one ball. And there's no catching: throw/drop, throw/drop, throw/drop. Twenty times we throw the ball from our left hands, watching it land each time.

And then we do it again with our right hands.

Practicing how to throw. Getting good at throwing. If you get good enough at throwing, the catching takes care of itself.

It turns out that all this dropping is the hardest part for someone who is learning to juggle. It makes them really uncomfortable to throw a ball and then stand there as it drops to the ground. The desire for outcome is deeply ingrained, and for some, this is the moment where they give up. They simply can't bear a process that willingly ignores the outcome.

For those who persist, the process quickly gathers momentum.

Perhaps fifteen minutes later, we try throw/throw/drop/drop. Simply two balls and two throws.

And then, without stress, throw/throw/catch/catch. It's easy. There's no problem, because the throws are where they should be, rehearsed and consistent.

The process has gotten us this far.

And then the last step is to add a third ball.

It doesn't always work, but it always works better than any other approach.

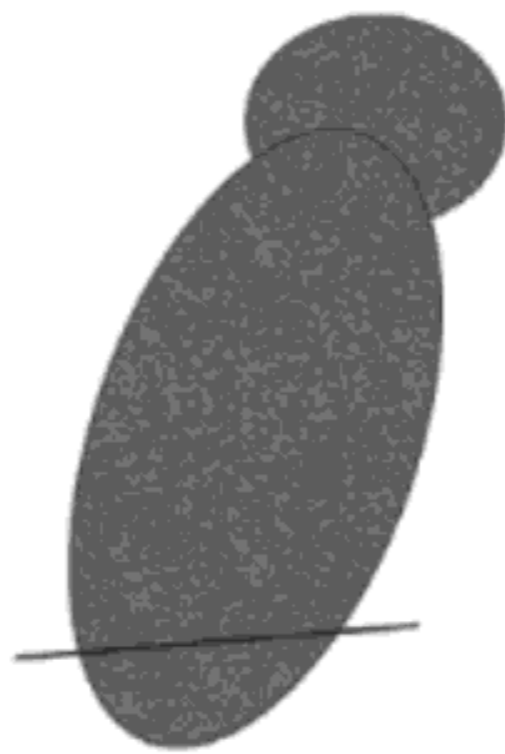
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Our work is about throwing. The catching can take care of itself.

7. How to Draw an Owl

It's a classic meme, based on an old comic book instruction manual.

How to draw an owl.



Step 1: draw two ovals
and a line



Step 2: draw the owl.

The humor lies in all the steps that are missing. Everyone knows how to draw two ovals and a line. No one, least of all me, knows how to draw the owl.

It highlights our desire to run from the pain of not being sure. The headline promises instruction, as life does. But, just like life, the headline is lying to us.

For the important work, the instructions are always insufficient. For the work we'd like to do, the reward comes from the fact that there is no guarantee, that the path isn't well lit, that we cannot possibly be sure it's going to work.

It's about throwing, not catching. Starting, not finishing. Improving, not being perfect.

No one learns to ride a bike from a manual. And no one learns to draw an owl that way either.

8. Does It Take Courage to Be Creative?

We care enough to stand as a leader, whether on the stage or behind the keyboard, and say, "Here, I made this." For some, this moment of being judged—where we're nothing but an imposter acting as if we belong—is overwhelming.

And so, too often, we walk away from a creative life, a chance to be generous, an opportunity to solve problems. Or, if we pursue it, we do it gingerly, treating creativity as a fragile magic trick, the gift of the muse. If we must be creative, we try to do it out of the corner of our eye. Staring at the magic directly is frightening.

Nonsense.

It doesn't have to be this way. We don't have to wait to be picked and we don't have to stand by, hoping that we will feel our calling. And we certainly don't have to believe in magic to create magic.

Instead, we can model the process of the successful creatives who have come before us. We can go on a journey with our eyes wide open, trusting the process and ourselves to create our best contribution.

This is our chance to make things better.

Being creative is a choice and creativity is contagious.

9. This Is Art

Not painting, but art: the act of doing something that might not work, simply because it's a generous thing to do. The combination of talent, skill, craft, and point of view that brings new light to old problems. The way we change our culture and ourselves.

Painting is something you do to a house. Art is the work we do where there is no right answer—and yet the journey is worth the effort. We might make art with a keyboard, with a paintbrush, or with our actions. Mostly, we do it because we lean into a practice, trusting we have a shot at making a difference.

We do it without a guarantee, with simply a practice we've chosen to commit to.

Are you an artist? Of course you are.

Artists make change happen. Artists are humans who do generous work that might not work. Artists aren't limited to paint or museums.

You're an artist as soon as you announce you are. As a leader, a

coach, a contributor, a designer, a musician, an impresario . . . it's art if you let it be. If you care enough.

Legendary designer and illustrator Milton Glaser said, "One of the problems with art is that it is self-anointing: Anyone can be an artist by simply pointing to themselves and saying so. The truth is that there are very few artists. [Making the world a better place through art] is the highest attainment of the specialization. It is to recognize that it is not all about you, and that you have a communal function you can serve to help everyone get along. This is important for people to understand, especially in a capitalist society."

You can choose to find your voice, or you can continue to ignore it.

10. Perhaps You Can Make Some Art

Art is what we call it when we're able to create something new that changes someone.

No change, no art.

When we ship our best work (at least our best in this moment), we have a chance to turn it into art. And then we have a chance to do it again.

It's a form of leadership, not management. A process without regard for today's outcome, a commitment to the journey.

You were born ready to make art. But you've been brainwashed into believing that you can't trust yourself enough to do so.

13. Flow Is a Symptom

We've all experienced it, and once we do, we itch to do it again.

That moment when distractions fade away, when the narrative backs off and the chatter dies down, when we're directly engaged with the work.

It might happen on a long hike or in a brainstorming session. It often happens when we're making art that matters.

But for many of us, it appears too rarely.

That might be because we're waiting for it to arrive. We're expecting it to choose us. We think the conditions have to be exactly right, since any deviance from them will cause it to evaporate.

But what if we built flow into the process? What if it were a choice?

Some creators use a blank piece of paper as a trigger. Others feel that way at the piano keyboard or when they take the podium at a meeting.

If we condition ourselves to work without flow, it's more likely to arrive.

It all comes back to trusting our *self* to create the change we seek. We don't agree to do that after flow arrives. We do the work, whether we feel like it or not, and then, without warning, flow can arise.

Flow is a symptom of the work we're doing, not the cause of it.

14. It's Time to Find Your Voice

You can find the way forward, a path toward making a difference.

There is a method, but it has no fixed steps.

There is a strategy, but the tactics don't really matter.

There is a process, but it doesn't always work.

The practice that is open to us always works better than anything else we could try.

Take the time to see what's worked before. Watch the creative heroes around us who have raised their hands, taken the lead, and created something that matters. Again and again, the work falls into a pattern, often containing counterintuitive twists and turns.

You can start where you are.

You can see and you can be seen.

You can listen and you can be heard.

And you can do the work that you were born to do.

Sometimes, we opt for more instead of better.

But better is better than more.

15. Finding Your Passion

One question comes up in my podcast (at akimbo.link) the most often: where do I find my passion? And the corollary: if I'm not passionate about my work, what should I do?

Once you decide to trust your *self*, you will have found your

passion. You're not born with it, and you don't have just one passion. It's not domain-specific: it's a choice.

Our passion is simply the work we've trusted ourselves to do.

This is worth deconstructing, because the strategy of "seeking your calling" gives you a marvelous place to hide.

After all, who wants to do difficult work that doesn't fulfill us? Who wants to commit to a journey before we know it's what we were meant to do?

The trap is this: only after we do the difficult work does it become our calling. Only after we trust the process does it become our passion.

"Do what you love" is for amateurs.

"Love what you do" is the mantra for professionals.

16. The Process and the Outcome

We live in an outcome-focused culture. A plumber doesn't get credit for effort; he gets credit if the faucet stops leaking. A corporation is rarely judged on the long-term impact of how it treats its employees; it is judged on its earnings per share.

A short-term focus on outcomes means that we decide if a book is good by its bestseller rank, if a singer is good based on winning a TV talent show, and if a child athlete is good based on whether or not she won a trophy.

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Lost in this obsession with outcome is the truth that outcomes are the results of process. Good processes, repeated over time, lead to good outcomes more often than lazy processes do.

Focusing solely on outcomes forces us to make choices that are banal, short-term, or selfish. It takes our focus away from the journey and encourages us to give up too early.

The practice of choosing creativity persists. It's a commitment to a process, not simply the next outcome on the list. We do this work for a reason, but if we triangulate the work we do and focus only on the immediate outcome, our practice will fall apart.

Our commitment to the process is the only alternative to the lottery-mindset of hoping for the good luck of getting picked by the universe.

Forgive the repetition, but it's here for a reason. A lifetime of brainwashing has taught us that work is about measurable results, that failure is fatal, and that we should be sure that the recipe is proven before we begin.

And so we bury our dreams.

We allow others to live in our head, reminding us that we are impostors with no hope of making an original contribution.

Our practice begins with the imperative that we embrace a different pattern, a pattern that offers no guarantees, requiring us to find a process and to trust ourselves.

You already have enough leverage.

You already see enough.

You already want to make things better.

Start where you are. Start now. Find the pattern and care enough to do something about it.

19. An Aside about Decisions

Annie Duke, former world champion of poker, teaches us that there's a huge gap between a good decision and a good outcome. A good decision is based on what we know of the options and the odds. A good outcome happens or it doesn't: it is a consequence of the odds, not the hidden answer.

Just as a good process doesn't guarantee the outcome you were hoping for, a good decision is separate from what happens next.

Flying across the country is safer than driving. If your goal is to get to Reno, the safest choice is to fly there, not to drive.

And if you know of someone who dies in a plane crash on the way to Reno, they didn't make a bad decision when they chose to fly. There was certainly a bad outcome, though.

Decisions are good even if the outcomes aren't.

The same is true for the process of generous creativity. The process is a smart one even if the particular work doesn't reso-