

THE BIG IDEAS

Rituals of Preparation

They're a must.

Mozart's Genius

= Discipline + work ethic.

Give Me 1 Week Without

Silly distractions.

Get Busy Copying

If you want to be great.

Reading

It does a mind good.

Stimulate Your Body

And your mind will follow.

Prepare

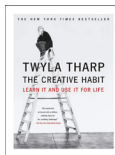
To be lucky.

Perfect Practice

Makes perfect.

Passion + Skill

= Magic formula.



The Creative Habit

Learn It and Use It for Life

BY TWYLA THARP · SIMON & SCHUSTER © 2005 · 256 PAGES

“I will keep stressing the point about creativity being augmented by routine and habit. Get used to it. In these pages a philosophical tug of war will periodically rear its head. It is the perennial debate, born in the Romantic era, between the beliefs that all creative acts are born of (a) some transcendent, inexplicable Dionysian act of inspiration, a kiss from God on your brow that allows you to give the world *The Magic Flute*, or (b) hard work.

If it isn't obvious already, I come down on the side of hard work. That's why this book is called *The Creative Habit*. Creativity is a habit, and the best creativity is a result of good work habits. That's it in a nutshell.”

~ Twyla Tharp from *The Creative Habit*

[Twyla Tharp](#) is awesome.

One of the greatest choreographers in the world, she'd created more than 130 (!!!) dances for her company as well as for everyone from the Joffrey Ballet to London's Royal Ballet.

In this great book, Twyla shares some uber-Big Ideas on how we can develop our Creative Habit to more consistently rock it.

Hope you enjoy a few of my favorites!

RITUALS OF PREPARATION

“More than anything, this book is about preparation: In order to be creative you have to know how to prepare to be creative.

No one can give you your subject matter, your creative content; if they could, it would be their creation, not yours. But there's a process that generates creativity—and you can learn it. And you can make it habitual.”

I love Tharp's intensity.

How's this for a ritual of preparation?

“I begin each day of my life with a ritual; I wake up at 5:30 A.M., put on my workout clothes, my leg warmers, my sweatshirts, and my hat. I walk outside my Manhattan home, hail a taxi, and tell the driver to take me to the Pumping Iron gym at 91st street and First Avenue, where I work out for two hours. The ritual is not the stretching and weight training I put my body through each morning at the gym; the ritual is the cab. The moment I tell the driver where to go I have completed the ritual.”

Powerful.

What are YOUR rituals?

Mine? As I've mentioned a number of times, I'm all about rising with the sun, meditating for 30

“It's vital to establish some rituals-automatic but decisive patterns of behavior-at the beginning of the creative process, when you are most at peril of turning back, chickening out, giving up, or going the wrong way.”

~ Twyla Tharp

minutes, journaling, moving, eating by 8 A.M. and creating!!

For the record: Although I haven't missed a day of meditation in 2 1/2+ years (or a day of exercise in months), the rest of these fundamentals have been way less consistent than I like over the last couple of weeks—and my overall mojo (creative and otherwise) reflects it!

I'd like to blame this issue on our move from Ecuador back to LA but, alas, it really has nothing to do with that! D'oh.

* Writes note to self: Get on it, yo! *

MOZART'S "GENIUS" = DISCIPLINE + WORK ETHIC

"There are no 'natural' geniuses."

~ Twyla Tharp

"Nobody worked harder than Mozart. By the time he was twenty-eight years old, his hands were deformed because of all the hours he had spent practicing, performing, and gripping a quill pen to compose. That's the missing element in the popular portrait of Mozart. Certainly, he had a gift that set him apart from others. He was the most complete musician imaginable, one who wrote for all instruments in all combinations, and no one has written greater music for the human voice. Still, few people, even those hugely gifted, are capable of the application and focus that Mozart displayed throughout his short life. As Mozart himself wrote to a friend, "People err who think my art comes easily to me. I assure you, dear friend, nobody has devoted so much time and thought to composition as I. There is not a famous master whose music I have not industriously studied through many times." Mozart's focus was fierce; it had to be for him to deliver the music he did in his relatively short life, under the conditions he endured, writing in coaches and delivering scores just before curtain went up, dealing with the distractions of raising a family and the constant need for money. Whatever scope and grandeur you attach to Mozart's musical gift, his so-called genius, his discipline and work ethic were its equal."

The Mozart Myth.

We've talked about it in a few of our Notes on creative genius and I think it's a very good idea to keep on coming back to it given the fact Mozart is often believed to be the poster-child for "natural" and "born" geniuses.

Uh, yah right. Not so much.

"The great ones never take fundamentals for granted."

~ Twyla Tharp

I love the way [Carol Dweck](#) (one of the world's leading researchers on motivation) puts it in her genius book [Mindset](#) (see Notes) where she asks: "Is it ability or mindset? Was it Mozart's musical ability or the fact that he worked till his hands were deformed? Was it Darwin's scientific ability or the fact that he collected specimens non-stop from early childhood?"

(In case you're wondering, the correct answers are: It was Mozart's incredible work ethic and it was Darwin's lifelong commitment to collecting specimens. ;)

In his equally awesome book, [Talent Is Overrated](#) (see Notes), [Geoff Colvin](#) tells us: "Mozart's first work regarded today as a masterpiece, with its status confirmed by the number of recordings available, is his Piano Concerto No. 9, composed when he was twenty-one. That's certainly an early age, but we must remember that by then Wolfgang had been through eighteen years of extremely hard, expert training."

Colvin offers this tip for parents as well: "The New Yorker's music critic, Alex Ross, sums up much of the recent scholarship on the Miracle of Salzburg: "Ambitious parents who are currently playing the 'Baby Mozart' video for their toddlers may be disappointed to learn that Mozart became Mozart by working furiously hard."")

And, Michelangelo's perspective on this seems appropriate here: "If people knew how hard I had to work to gain my mastery, it would not seem so wonderful at all."

So, let's remember that the equation for Mozart's genius was *not*: Birth → Genius.

"No matter what system you use, I recommend having a goal and putting it in writing."
~ Twyla Tharp

It was: Birth → Decades of extremely hard work leading to mangled hands → Genius.

P.S. How 'bout one more blurb from Tharp: "Even Mozart, with all his innate gifts, his passion for music, and his father's devoted tutelage, needed to get twenty-four youthful symphonies under his belt before he composed something enduring with number twenty-five. If art is the bridge between what you see in your mind and what the world sees, then skill is how you build that bridge."

GIVE ME ONE WEEK WITHOUT

"People go on diets all the time. If they don't like their weight, they stop eating certain foods. If their spending is out of control, they lock away their credit cards. If they need quiet time at home, they take the phone off the hook. These are all diets of one kind or another. Why not do the same for your creative health? Take a week off from clutter and distractions."

Love it.

Tharp suggests a range of distractions from which we can choose to diet including: mirrors, watches, newspapers, TV, the coffee shop, etc.

I'm personally dieting from ESPN (2+ months in... go me! :) and the news (I had swapped my fasting from ESPN with feasting on general news... d'oh! :).

How 'bout you?

What could you afford to trim back from your life for awhile?

GET BUSY COPYING

"As Freud said, "When inspiration does not come to me, I go halfway to meet it.""
~ Twyla Tharp

"If there's a lesson here it's: get busy copying. That's not a popular notion today, not when we are all instructed to find our own way, admonished to be original and find our own voice at all costs! But it's sound advice. Traveling the paths of greatness, even in someone else's footprints, is a vital means to acquiring skill."

Copying the greats.

Tharp goes off on the power of copying masters and gives a number of examples of great writers who, early in their careers, copied artists *they* thought were great.

Reminds me of [Bruce Lee](#) and Kobe Bryant.

Before Bruce Lee developed his own style, he mastered a number of arts. (Didn't dabble with but *mastered.*) While Kobe Bryant, arguably one of the greatest basketball players ever, often describes how he's always loved to watch tapes of the old greats and try to copy their signature moves.

Laughing at the fact that this is, obviously, essentially what I'm doing with these Notes: literally copying quote after quote and getting a deeper and deeper feel for what the greats have said across the ages as I develop my own approach to life.

How about *you*?

What masters can you get busy copying?!

Get on that. :)

READING. IT DOES A MIND GOOD.

"If I stopped reading, I'd stop thinking. It's that simple."

Reminds me of [Confucius](#)' quip (see Notes on [The Analects](#)) that "Those who do not study are only cattle dressed up in men's clothes."

"Solitude is an unavoidable part of creativity. Self-reliance is a happy by-product."

~ Twyla Tharp

Also reminds me of [Joseph Campbell](#)'s brilliant line from [Pathways to Bliss](#) (see Notes):

"For myself, well, Alan Watts once asked me what spiritual practice I followed. I told him, 'I underline books.' It's all in how you approach it."

And, how about a little love from Twyla on *how* she reads? She tells us: "When I'm reading archeologically, I'm not reading for pleasure. I read the way I scratch for an idea, digging down deep so I can get something out of it and use it in my work. I read *transactionally*: How can I use this? It's not enough for me to read a book. I have to "own" it. I scribble in the margins. I circle sentences I like and connect them with arrows to other useful sentences. I draw stars and exclamation points on every good page, to the point where the book is almost unreadable. By writing all over the pages, I transform the author's work into my book—and mine alone."

Genius.

That's pretty much how I read—literally hunting for Big Ideas I can share with you in these Notes as I asterisk and exclamation point and underline the heck out of the great parts.

On that note, you might dig a little YouTube video I did on how I read a book. Click here or Google "PhilosophersNotes + YouTube + How I read a book"!

Back to you again. Are you reading/studying?

Get on that! :)

STIMULATE YOUR BODY & YOUR MIND

"I can't say enough about the connection between body and mind; when you stimulate your body, your brain comes alive in ways you can't simulate in a sedentary position. The brain is an organ, tied integrally to all the other systems in the body, and it's affected by blood flow, neural transmission, all the processes you undergo when you put your body through its paces."

As you know if you've read many of these Notes, I'm a HUGE fan of movement/exercise to aid both creativity and overall well-being.

I'll repeat: NOT exercising is like taking a depressant. (As per Tal Ben-Shahar!)

"When you're in a rut, you have to question everything but your ability to get out of it."

~ Twyla Tharp

[John Ratey](#), M.D. puts it brilliantly in his GREAT (!!!) book [Spark](#) (see the Notes, please! :) where he tells us: "To keep our brains at peak performance, our bodies need to work hard. In *Spark*, I'll demonstrate how and why physical activity is crucial to the way we think and feel. I'll explain the science of how exercise cues the building blocks of learning in the brain; how it affects mood, anxiety, and attention; how it guards against stress and reverses some of the effects of aging in the brain; and how in women it can help stave off the sometimes tumultuous effects of hormonal changes. I'm not talking about the fuzzy notion of runner's high. I'm not talking about a notion at all. These are tangible changes, measured in lab rats and identified in people."

This isn't a "maybe it helps" kinda thing. It's a scientific FACT.

As [Sonja Lyubomirsky](#) tells us in [The How of Happiness](#) (see Notes): "No one in our society needs to be told that exercise is good for us. Whether you are overweight or have a chronic illness or are a slim couch potato, you've probably heard or read this dictum countless times throughout your life. But has anyone told you—indeed, guaranteed you—that regular physical activity will make you happier? I swear by it."

You exercising enough?

If so, SWEET!

If not, get on that!! :)

*"I know it's important to be prepared, but at the start of the process this type of perfectionism is more like procrastination. You've got to get in there and *do.*"*

~ Twyla Tharp

PREPARE TO BE LUCKY

"Habitually creative people are, in E. B. White's phrase, "prepared to be lucky."

The key words here are "prepared" and "lucky." They're inseparable. You don't get lucky without preparation, and there's no sense in being prepared if you're not open to the possibility of a glorious accident."

Luck.

That wonderful location at the crossroads of preparation and good fortune.

I can't think of the word without thinking of Thomas Jefferson's mojo: *"I find that the harder I work, the more luck I seem to have."*

You working hard and preparing to be lucky? Or just buying lottery tickets? :)

P.S. Twyla adds: "Being prepared for luck is like getting a voice message that tells you, "Something good may happen to you between 9:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M. today. Make sure you're at your desk (or in your studio or office or at your laboratory bench) working. And keep your eyes open for it."

Plus: "Woody Allen said that eighty percent of success in show business is showing up. It's the same thing with luck: eighty percent of it is showing up to see it."

PERFECT PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

"Confidence is a trait that has to be earned honestly and refreshed constantly; you have to work as hard to protect your skills as you did to develop them. This means vigilant practice and excellent practice habits. You've heard the phrase "Practice makes perfect"? Not true. *Perfect practice* makes perfect. The one thing that creative souls around the world have in common is that they all have to practice to maintain their skills. Art is a vast democracy of habit."

Lots of goodness there!

First, the poetic: *"Art is a vast democracy of habit."*

Ah. Love that.

And, reminds me of [Eric Butterworth](#)'s genius goodness on practice from his brilliant [Spiritual Economics](#) (see Notes) where he tells us: *"Ask the great athlete or the concert pianist or the successful actor if they arrived at the place where they need no further practice. They will tell you that the higher you climb in proficiency and public acceptance, the greater the need for practice."*

In his great book [The Talent Code](#) (see Notes), [Daniel Coyle](#) takes it all a step further and tells us: *"To sum up: it's time to rewrite the maxim that practice makes perfect. The truth is, practice makes myelin, and myelin makes perfect."*

Check out the Notes for more goodness on the myelin that's formed in your brain when you practice and know that, again, it's not *any* kind of practice. It's what he calls "deep practice."

In Coyle's words: *"Deep practice is built on a paradox: struggling in certain targeted ways—operating at the edges of your ability, where you make mistakes—makes you smarter. Or to put it a slightly different way, experiences where you're forced to slow down, make errors, and correct them—as you would if you were walking up an ice-covered hill, slipping and stumbling as you go—end up making you swift and graceful without you realizing it."*

You practicing deeply and perfectly? :)

"What makes it a ritual is that they do it without questioning the need."

~ Twyla Tharp

"Don't drive yourself to the point of being totally spent. Try to stop while you have a few drops left in your tank, and use that fuel to build a bridge to the next day."

~ Twyla Tharp

*"Discipline. Everyone needs it.
No explanation required."*

~ Twyla Tharp

PASSION + SKILL

"Without passion, all the skill in the world won't lift you above craft. Without skill, all the passion in the world will leave you eager but floundering. Combining the two is the essence of the creative life."

Amen to that.

And, as it turns out, that's pretty much *exactly* what Sir [Ken Robinson](#) tells us in his great book [The Element](#) (see Notes) where he tells us: "My aim in writing [this book] is to offer a richer version of human ability and creativity and of the benefits to us all of connecting properly with our individual talents and passions. This book is about issues that are of fundamental importance in our lives and in the lives of our children, our students, and the people we work with. I use the term the Element to describe the place where the things we love to do and the things we are good at come together. I believe it is essential that each of us find his or her Element, not simply because it will make us more fulfilled but because, as the world evolves, the very future of our communities and institutions will depend on it."

Where do YOUR passion and skill meet?

How can you rock your Element a little (or perhaps a lot?) more?!

Here's to developing the creative habit of rockin' it!! :)

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,
you'll probably like...

[The War of Art](#)

[The Element](#)

[The Talent Code](#)

[Spark](#)

[Mastery](#)

[Constructive Living](#)

About the Author of "The Creative Habit"

TWYLA THARP



Twyla Tharp, one of America's greatest choreographers, began her career in 1965, and has created more than 130 dances for her company as well as for the Joffrey Ballet, The New York City Ballet, Paris Opera Ballet, London's Royal Ballet, and American Ballet Theatre. (from Barnes & Noble)

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.