

The Creative Habit



One of the world's most prolific and innovative choreographers offers wisdom on cultivating and sharing your own creative gifts

In her great book, *The Creative Habit* (Simon & Schuster, 2005), Twyla Tharp shares advice on how we can develop our own creative habits and put them to use more often. Here are some of my favorite Big Ideas from the book. I hope you find them as inspiring and enjoyable as I do!

The Mozart Myth

“Nobody worked harder than Mozart,” writes Tharp. “By the time he was 28 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.’”

Sure, some people might be predisposed to certain skills and talents, but all our natural predispositions need time, practice and dedication to become real genius. As another artistic genius, the Renaissance painter Michelangelo, once said, “If people knew how hard I had to work to gain mastery, it would not seem so wonderful at all.”

Creativity and “genius” are all about hard work. So stop telling yourself you aren’t talented and start practicing the skill you want to develop. Talent will follow.

Go on a Distraction Diet

“People go on diets all the time,” writes Tharp. “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 the clutter and distractions.”

Pause for a moment and think about activities or habits that might be filling up your free time in unsatisfying (or at least in non-creativity-promoting) ways: TV, video games, mirrors, shopping, going out every night. It could be any number of things. I’m personally dieting from ESPN (two-plus months without the sports channel so far — go, me!) and the news (when I first went off ESPN, I swapped it for round-the-clock news — not a good idea).

How about you? What could you afford to trim from your life for a while? Remember, you don’t have to give it up forever. Start with a week, and see what you get accomplished in its place.

Copy the Masters

Another way to acquire the skills you want is to use the examples of the greats for inspiration, writes Tharp.

“If there’s a lesson here,” she writes, “it’s: Get busy copying.” Copying is not a popular notion today, she notes — “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.”

Attempts at copying or doing variations on a master's theme, Tharp suggests, can help you jump-start, develop and deepen your own work.

Her advice reminds me of Kobe Bryant — arguably one of the greatest basketball players ever — who often describes how he's always loved to watch tapes of the old greats and try to copy their signature moves.

I'm also laughing at — and loving — the fact that that is essentially what I'm doing with these Notes: finding profound quotes and getting a deeper feel for what the greats have said across the ages as I develop my own approach to life.

There is much to learn from greatness.

Active Body, Creative 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," writes Tharp. "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."

I'm a huge fan of exercise and movement to aid creativity and overall well-being. As Harvard psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar has said, not exercising is like taking a depressant. And as his colleague John Ratey, MD, Harvard professor of psychiatry, writes in his book *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*, "To keep our brains at peak performance, our bodies need to work hard."

The experts all agree: This isn't a "maybe it helps" kinda thing. It's scientific fact.

So if you're getting regular exercise, keep it up. If not, get on it ASAP! Exercise could rev up your creative practice more than any other factor.

Prepare to be Lucky

Luck isn't something that happens just to the lucky. Creative luck, in particular, more often strikes those who've done a fair bit of spadework creating the fertile conditions that support it.

Tharp puts it this way: "Habitually creative people are, in E. B. White's phrase, 'prepared to be lucky.' . . . 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."

As the saying goes, you make your own luck — and not by buying lottery tickets. You make it by being prepared, by showing up every day and working hard, and by keeping your eyes open for opportunities.

Why not start developing your own creative habit today? Ditch some distractions, do some inspired copying, move your body — and get ready for your creative "luck" to improve