

Unleashing Your Creativity

*Creativity is a team of sled dogs. Discipline is the leash.
Control them and you will make progress.
Let them run wild and they will turn on you.*

EXCUSES, EXCUSES

*Excuses satisfy only those who make them.
— Anonymous.*

1. ***Is creativity important?*** If you believe that life has a purpose, what could that purpose possibly be? To simply live, get up in the morning, marry, have children, work? Or to learn, experience, and grow? And how do we grow? We exercise our innate curiosity; we want to know *why*, *how*, and *when*—like any three year-old. We may have forgotten that learning is oxygen. That is why we feel starved in the modern world; we've put curiosity on hold, and we're suffocating.

*It is the creative potential itself in human beings that is the image of God.
— Mary Daly*

*Nothing has a stronger influence psychologically on a child than the un-lived life of the parent.
— Carl Jung*

2. ***Okay, so it's important, but I'm not creative!*** Not true! Everything we do, every day, at every moment, is an exercise in creativity, which is simply *making choices*. Picking which colors to wear, even which exit to use on the freeway is a creative choice. Unglamorous, true, but creative none the less.

*There is no subject so old that something new cannot be said about it.
— Fyodor Dostoevsky*

3. ***Okay, so I'm creative. So what?*** That means you are an *artist!* And artists live in a world of passion, discipline, courage and responsibility.

*A work of art has no importance whatever to society. It is only important to the individual.
— Vladimir Nabokov*

The purpose of art is not a rarified, intellectual distillate—it is life, intensified, brilliant life.

— *Alain Arias-Misson*

4. ***But who cares what I think?*** The truth is: no one. That is, no one but *you*. Yet. But your story, the story you wish to tell, has universal truths and we all want to know these truths. But altruism alone is not a good enough reason to write. The secret key and motivation is that we learn from ourselves. We enlarge our knowledge when we organize our thoughts and ideas; we expose our prejudices, our pettiness, and our hearts. And though it may be painful, who can say it isn't good? Growth is good.

I write for myself and strangers. The strangers, dear Readers, are an afterthought.

— *Gertrude Stein*

5. ***But I don't have time to be creative.*** That's true. You don't have time—you must make it. To do so, you must *organize* your life and make creativity a priority.
- a. Make a list of 20 things you do every day.
 - b. Prioritize the list from 1 to 20 in terms of importance. Be honest.
 - c. Study the list. This is your value system; it represents what is important to you.
 - d. Are you satisfied with it? If not . . .
 - e. Re-order the list, move things up and down according to the life you want to live; the person you want to be.
 - f. Where does “art” fit into the list. Think about its relative importance. Is it more important than your spouse, your children, your siblings, your job? Probably not. But is it more important than watching TV or chatting on the phone? If it isn't, you don't want to be an artist. Period. You just want to watch others create.

If I didn't write, I would be part of the chaos.

— *Tony Morrison*

6. ***I still can't find time! Help!*** No worries. You have 24 hours in a day, just like Ann Tyler does. What you don't have yet is a *reservoir* of creativity that whips the dogs into motion. This reservoir is built of

Observation: When others are talking, don't just be thinking of what you will say next, truly listen. The cadence in their speech, their use of contractions, slang, their accent. Watch their eyes and their use of gestures. Watching and listening carefully builds a reservoir of characterizations you will use later.

When I described how Emma Bovary poisoned herself, I had such a strong taste of arsenic in my mouth, I was so poisoned myself, that I had two attacks of indigestion, one after the other, very real attacks, for I vomited my entire dinner.

— Gustave Flaubert

Tools of the trade: invest in a small palm-size tape recorder. Record your observations after you make them. As you're waiting for the light to change, press the REC button and list what you see at the intersection. How many cars? What colors? Use your imagination: make up stories about the strangers in their cars. Where are they going? Church? A funeral? Whose funeral? A baseball game? Who will win? Are they happy? Why? By the time you pull away, you will have structured and entire scenario for these strangers. As you drive, record your observations and your creative engineering of their lives. Invent freely—no one will ever read or hear this. This exercise is just for you.

Fiction is a lie that tells the truth.

— Anonymous

Pencils and paper! Note pads and pens! By the bedside, in the glove box, sitting on the ironing board. In your coat pocket or purse. Everywhere you turn, there are the tools of recording your observations. Spiral notebooks, dry erase boards on the fridge.

I put a piece of paper under my pillow, and when I could not sleep I wrote in the dark.

— Henry David Thoreau

Vocabulary. Try this: describe the color of the sky today, and no fair using “blue” or “gray.” Describe it metaphorically: if the sky was a car, what kind would it be? If it was an actor or a character in a movie, who would it be? If it was a woman, what would her expression be? Metaphor is the most powerful tool a writer has. The ability to describe a common object in a new way is the key to exciting writing. And you can do it, too, but you must practice!

Ideas? My head is full of them, one after the other, but they serve no purpose there.

They must be put down on paper, one after the other.

— Camilo Jose Cela

Reading. This is the most fun; it's what makes you want to write, isn't it? Good and bad, important and banal, it all teaches. Read writers you admire, writers you despise. Find something good in the bad, bad in the good. Take notes in the margins. Review the book on

the end pages, discuss them with friends. Don't be afraid to argue, it stirs the blood and makes you think. Keep a list of great phrases and ideas, metaphors and similes.

I never desire to converse with a man who has written more than he has read.

— Samuel Johnson

Mediocre composers borrow, great composers steal.

— Anonymous

7. ***All right. I've made it a priority and given it time. What next?*** You've managed to locate one hour a day when you can be dedicated to creativity. The plants are watered, the washing machine chugs away sonorously downstairs, the dishwasher whooshes in the kitchen and the clock ticks quietly on the wall. Now for the hardest part: sit down!

Most writers don't understand that the process of writing begins by actually sitting down.

— Sinclair Lewis

Stare at the screen, organize your pencil holder, straighten the desk, dust the books. Then sit down again. And stare at the screen. Nothing. Nothing comes. Or something is coming but it's too big, too hard, and too painful to face. You get up and walk out to check on the laundry. On the way back you look for items to dust or straighten and think of phone calls you must return. But then you finally sit down again and put your hands on the keyboard. What next? You've procrastinated long enough, it's time to dig in.

Start by writing for 15 minutes in your journal. This will loosen the joints, focus the mind on something you feel is "non-creative." But make sure your journal is not one of those "for my posterity" journals in which you will lie about your life. Don't. Honesty is the key to success. Instead write a journal only you will ever read. Lock it up in the computer using a password only you know. Brutal honesty leads to truth, in history and fiction alike. After fifteen minutes (it went by so fast!), exit the journal and turn to your manuscript.

A good novel tells us the truth about its hero; but a bad novel tells us the truth about its author.

— G. K. Chesterton

8. ***I'm writing, but it's terrible!*** Going nowhere fast? Wondering if you're just wasting time? Then (and this will please you) . . . quit! Stop right there! You *are* wasting time. Here's what's wrong:

Writers block is the result of lack of research.

It's true! If you're stuck, if the words don't just pour out of you onto the page, good words, important, telling words, then stop. You are not ready yet to write.

9. ***Back to the drawing board.*** Research begins with character.

I don't write plots, I write characters. What they do surprises me and results in plot.

I have no idea where it comes from, but I find it when I follow my characters.

— Elmore Leonard

How? By doing the following exercises:

- a. *Character sketch:* an audition on paper. Describe every physical detail of the person. Start with concrete details, then expand the sketch with emotional and mental traits: courage, fear, helpless, mean, kind, etc.
- b. *Backstory:* what happened to the person the day, week, or month before your story begins. Write a short life synopsis. Parents? Siblings? Work? Education? Hobbies? Old loves?
- c. *Dream:* What does the character dream about? Dreams reveal wants and fears and deep character. Images form that reappear later. People arise and become secondary characters in the story. Old wounds are opened, darkness inside a cheerful person is revealed; as is good inside the villain. Complexity = fascinating characters. Dream with them.
- d. *Wardrobe and ritual:* write their morning ritual: who do they see in the mirror. Look at them from inside their eyes. What do they wear for work? What do they think about while showering? What do they have for breakfast? Why? How do they approach the day? With curiosity and joy? Fear and loathing? Expand. Use the senses. What do they see, hear, feel, smell? What's in the closet? Why?

When your characters become living, breathing people, they will sneak up behind you at the computer, lay their hand lightly on your shoulder, lean in and whisper excitedly in your ear: "Write me! Tell my story!" And the roadblocks will crumble to dust.

What writers call the "muse" is nothing more or less than adequate preparation.

10. ***My hour's up! But I want more!*** Stop writing in the middle of a sentence. You know how it ends. Leave it for tomorrow. Now, recuperate. You've worked hard; used your time wisely. The washing machine is buzzing; time to load another batch. Make that phone call, get your

errand list out and go live your life. Leave off writing, but keep your recorder and note pads with you. Throughout the day, your mind will return to your writing, editing, criticizing and gloating over your brilliant prose. Key on the positive; time to edit later. Review the scenes you wrote in your mind as you drive to the store. Turn the radio off! Think of colors that describe the emotions of the scene. List them for tomorrow. Watch the gestures of the cashier for inclusion with your character to make the scene come alive.

I write about fantastic, unbelievable things. No one would believe a Coke machine could bounce down the street chasing a man, intent upon killing him. But if I describe that Coke machine in enough accurate detail, right down to the chips in the paint and the condensation on the cans through the glass, you will see it . . . and you will believe it when it comes after you.

— Stephen King

All writing is observation.

— Anonymous

11. ***Discipline!*** Work steadily; Rome wasn't built in a day. But don't feel guilty if life interferes with your schedule. Take solace that every day you are making notes, keeping records, writing down ideas and colors, emotions and smells that will make your scenes come alive. Look for the sense sensations on every page you write: sight, sound, smell, touch, taste. That's how you make it real and draw your audience in.
12. ***The hardest part: let others read it.*** And though your family is a good start, don't stop there. Give it to acquaintances or better yet, the people in your writing or reading club. Ask for written notes—just one page. Get feedback. Don't defend. Listen carefully, don't explain, don't rationalize. If they don't get it from the words on the page, you failed. You won't be there to explain your real intent to the reader in Chicago a year from now.

*I know a great secret; the secret to success. It is this:
failure doesn't kill you, you'll just feel dead. For a while.*

13. ***Return to the scene of the crime.*** Take the notes, the ideas, the criticisms and put them in a folder, saving them. Then on a bright, sunny morning, pull them out, take a deep breath and consider: are they right? Is my writing pedantic and boring? Stilted and pretentious? Don't pay any attention to the praise; you knew it was good already. Your inner voice was telling you both the good and the bad, but you should only listen to the good when you write. The bad kills creativity; ignore it. Until now. Now you must consider the bad in you. The Evil; the destroyer; the killer of truth. Pull your shiny sword from its sheath, angle it in the sun; watch

the light refract off its polished surface. Hold it high, take a deep breath and bring it crashing down on the wickedness of your lies. Cut sentences, pare descriptions. Write the complaints in big block letters and tape them on the wall behind your monitor. They are true—they are what your readers read. And so this truth, this mistake, is what you gave them. Cut it out, shear asunder bone and blood until only the white meat of truth remains. Blood thirsty, terrible as an army with banners, and fearless—this is you.

A writer must kill her children.
— Willa Cather

14. **More reviews, more cutting, more bloodshed.** You must not fear this time. It is when the truth will emerge from the dross.

I simply remove all that which is not the sculpture.
— Michelangelo

15. **Courage, confidence and contentment.** Whenever I do book signings, there is always someone who picks up my book, ruffles the pages idly, then absently asks me what *else* I've written. After I pull their icy dagger from my dead heart, I smile and ask them what kind of books *they* write.

*Critics are like eunuchs in a harem; they know how it's done,
they've seen it done every day, but they're unable to do it themselves.*
— Benjamin Behan

I love every bone in their heads.
— Eugene O'Neill

You must believe in your work. Your own inner barometer will speak truth if you listen to it; otherwise it will lie to you like an enemy's promise. Listen to it and follow it. Your story is valuable; your ideas are good. What needs work is *how* you tell it. That's all. Simple.

No book is ever finished. We just leave off editing it.
— Anonymous

16. **Your work is exactly one-half done.** You've written, edited, excised, been reviewed, argued, defended (if only to yourself), re-written, and re-edited. Now, full of confidence that this is the best you can do in the time allotted, you must submit, subject yourself to even crueler

criticism, and wait . . . and wait . . . and wait. Inquiry letters, letters to agents, letters and phone calls to authors you know or want to meet, library research, memorizing LMP or Writer's Market. Stacks of quarters on the xerox, making copies of agencies, publishers, or printers (if you dare self-publish). Another amazing, foolish, outlandish and incredibly exciting journey awaits you. Board now, pull up the gangplank, set sail, and steer into the sun. No matter what else happens, you have done what not one in a thousand has done: *You have written a book*. Toast the heavens and drink the sweet nectar of success. Then pick up an oar, because . . .

If there is no wind, row.

— *Latin proverb*

17. ***Get right back to work.*** While you await the inevitable rave reviews, offers of six-digit advances and literary fame, turn your back on the fawning world and sit back down at the computer. Begin again: the research, the character development, the plot on 3 x 5 cards, shuffled liberally, the reviews, the rewrites, and re-submissions. Don't worry about your manuscript's progress out in the world; it knows its way; its compass points to the magnetic north of the reader who aches for it. If it returns to you unloved, caress it, inspire it, rewrite it, and send it on its way again. And write companions for it that will pass it in the night mail or lie quietly in the next canvas bag on a ratcheting train lumbering across the heartland. Imagine! Your words going places you will never go, even if unread! And if read, imagine! Your words finding themselves on the lips of strangers, drawn in on curious breath, lodging cozily in hearts of distant people of a different color than you. Your words, your ideas, taken in like sherbet, savored and remembered, shared and hoarded. Imagine! The same passage you wrote making a man on a train in New York wipe a tear away because you spoke truth so boldly and with such passion! Your words, honed, cut, sliced, arranged, sprinkled with punctuation and spiced with metaphor and adverb, eaten like a deli sandwich on rich, dark bread, thick with experience and savory with insight. Your words. *Your words.*

Tighten the reins of discipline, consult the compass for the path which leads to a reader like you, snap the whip of research, holler words of encouragement to the team, pull your hat down against the chill winds of criticism, and give the dogs their heads. They exist to pull you along, to make the journey swift and joyful. Their energy is boundless. They are creativity, and they exist with or without us. But we are invited along for the ride. Step aboard, squint into the rising sun and cross the snowfield toward the distant mountains. The journey is begun.

The first step is the hardest.

— *your mom*