

TWYLA THARP

THE CREATIVE HABIT

LEARN IT AND USE IT FOR LIFE

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

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The Creative Habit

Chapter 1

I walk into a white room

I walk into a large white room. It's a dance studio in midtown Manhattan. I'm wearing a sweatshirt, faded jeans, and Nike cross-trainers. The room is lined with eight-foot-high mirrors. There's a boom box in the corner. The floor is clean, virtually spotless if you don't count the thousands of skid marks and footprints left there by dancers rehearsing. Other than the mirrors, the boom box, the skid marks, and me, the room is empty.

In five weeks I'm flying to Los Angeles with a troupe of six dancers to perform a dance program for eight consecutive evenings in front of twelve hundred people every night. It's my troupe. I'm the choreographer. I have half of the program in hand—a fifty-minute ballet for all six dancers set to Beethoven's twenty-ninth piano sonata, the "Hammerklavier." I created the piece more than a year ago on many of these same dancers, and I've spent the past few weeks rehearsing it with the company.

The other half of the program is a mystery. I don't know what music I'll be using. I don't know which dancers I'll be working with. I have no idea what the costumes will look like, or the lighting, or who will be performing the music. I have no idea of the length of the piece, although it has to be long enough to fill the second half of a full program to give the paying audience its money's worth.

The length of the piece will dictate how much rehearsal time I need. This, in turn, means getting on

the phone to dancers, scheduling studio time, and getting the ball rolling—all on the premise that something wonderful will come out of what I fashion in the next few weeks in this empty white room.

My dancers expect me to deliver because my choreography represents their livelihood. The presenters in Los Angeles expect the same because they've sold a lot of tickets to people with the promise that they'll see something new and interesting from me. The theater owner (without really thinking about it) expects it as well; if I don't show up, his theater will be empty for a week. That's a lot of people, many of whom I've never met, counting on me to be creative.

But right now I'm not thinking about any of this. I'm in a room with the obligation to create a major dance piece. The dancers will be here in a few minutes. What are we going to do?

To some people, this empty room symbolizes something profound, mysterious, and terrifying: the task of starting with nothing and working your way toward creating something whole and beautiful and satisfying. It's no different for a writer rolling a fresh sheet of paper into his typewriter (or more likely firing up the blank screen on his computer), or a painter confronting a virginal canvas, a sculptor staring at a raw chunk of stone, a composer at the piano with his fingers hovering just above the keys. Some people find this moment—the moment before creativity begins—so painful that they simply cannot deal with it. They get up and walk away from the computer, the canvas, the keyboard; they take a nap or go shopping or fix lunch or do chores around the house. They procrastinate. In its most extreme form, this terror totally paralyzes people.

The blank space can be humbling. But I've faced it my whole professional life. It's my job. It's also my calling. Bottom line: Filling this empty space constitutes my identity.

I'm a dancer and choreographer. Over the last 35 years, I've created 130 dances and ballets. Some of them are good, some less good (that's an understatement—some were public humiliations). I've worked with dancers in almost every space and environment

you can imagine. I've rehearsed in cow pastures. I've rehearsed in hundreds of studios, some luxurious in their austerity and expansiveness, others filthy and gritty, with rodents literally racing around the edges of the room. I've spent eight months on a film set in Prague, choreographing the dances and directing the opera sequences for Milos Forman's *Amadeus*. I've staged sequences for horses in New York City's Central Park for the film *Hair*. I've worked with dancers in the opera houses of London, Paris, Stockholm, Sydney, and Berlin. I've run my own company for three decades. I've created and directed a hit show on Broadway. I've worked long enough and produced with sufficient consistency that by now I find not only challenge and trepidation but peace as well as promise in the empty white room. It has become my home.

After so many years, I've learned that being creative is a full-time job with its own daily patterns. That's why writers, for example, like to establish routines for themselves. The most productive ones get started early in the morning, when the world is quiet, the phones aren't ringing, and their minds are rested, alert, and not yet polluted by other people's words. They might set a goal for themselves—write fifteen hundred words, or stay at their desk until noon—but the real secret is that they do this every day. In other words, they are disciplined. Over time, as the daily routines become second nature, discipline morphs into habit.

It's the same for any creative individual, whether it's a painter finding his way each morning to the easel, or a medical researcher returning daily to the laboratory. The routine is as much a part of the creative process as the lightning bolt of inspiration, maybe more. And this routine is available to everyone.

Creativity is not just for artists. It's for **businesspeople** looking for a new way to close a sale; it's for **engineers** trying to solve a problem; it's for **parents** who want their **children** to see the world in more than one way. Over the past four decades, I have been engaged in one creative pursuit or another every day, in both my professional and my personal life. I've thought a great deal about what it means to be creative, and how to go

about it efficiently. I've also learned from the painful experience of going about it in the worst possible way. I'll tell you about both. And I'll give you exercises that will challenge some of your creative assumptions—to make you stretch, get stronger, last longer. After all, you stretch before you jog, you loosen up before you work out, you practice before you play. It's no different for your mind.

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.

The film *Amadeus* (and the play by Peter Shaffer on which it's based) dramatizes and romanticizes the divine origins of creative genius. Antonio Salieri, representing the talented hack, is cursed to live in the time of Mozart, the gifted and undisciplined genius who writes as though touched by the hand of God. Salieri recognizes the depth of Mozart's genius, and is tortured that God has chosen someone so unworthy to be His divine creative vessel.

Of course, this is hogwash. **There are no "natural" geniuses.** Mozart was his father's son. Leopold Mozart had gone through an arduous education, not just in music, but also in philosophy and religion; he was a sophisticated, broad-thinking man, famous throughout Europe as a composer and pedagogue. This is not news to music lovers. Leopold had a massive influence on his young son. I question how much of a "natural" this young boy was. Genetically, of course, he was probably more inclined to write music than, say, play basketball, since he was only three feet tall when he captured the public's attention. But his first good fortune was to have a father who was a composer and a virtuoso on

the violin, who could approach keyboard instruments with skill, and who upon recognizing some ability in his son, said to himself, "This is interesting. He likes music. Let's see how far we can take this."

Leopold taught the young Wolfgang everything about music, including counterpoint and harmony. He saw to it that the boy was exposed to everyone in Europe who was writing good music or could be of use in Wolfgang's musical development. Destiny, quite often, is a determined parent. Mozart was hardly some naive prodigy who sat down at the keyboard and, with God whispering in his ears, let the music flow from his fingertips. It's a nice image for selling tickets to movies, but whether or not God has kissed your brow, you still have to work. Without learning and preparation, you won't know how to harness the power of that kiss.

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 the 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.

I'm sure this is what Leopold Mozart saw so early in

his son who, as a three-year-old, one day impulsively jumped up on the stool to play his older sister's harpsichord—and was immediately smitten. Music quickly became Mozart's passion, his preferred activity. I seriously doubt that Leopold had to tell his son for very long, "Get in there and practice your music." The child did it on his own.

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 and not yours. But there's a process that generates creativity—and you can learn it. And you can make it habitual.

There's a paradox in the notion that creativity should be a habit. We think of creativity as a way of keeping everything fresh and new, while habit implies routine and repetition. That paradox intrigues me because it occupies the place where creativity and skill rub up against each other.

It takes skill to bring something you've imagined into the world: to use words to create believable lives, to select the colors and textures of paint to represent a haystack at sunset, to combine ingredients to make a flavorful dish. No one is born with that skill. It is developed through exercise, through repetition, through a blend of learning and reflection that's both painstaking and rewarding. And it takes time. 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.

That's the reason for the exercises. They will help you develop skill. Some might seem simple. Do them anyway—you can never spend enough time on the basics. Before he could write *Così fan tutte*, Mozart had practiced his scales.

While modern dance and ballet are my *métier*, they are not the subject of this book. I promise you that the

text will not be littered with dance jargon. You will not be confused by first positions and pliés and tendus in these pages. I will assume that you're a reasonably sophisticated and open-minded person. I hope you've been to the ballet and seen a dance company in action on stage. If you haven't, shame on you; that's like admitting you've never read a novel or strolled through a museum or heard a Beethoven symphony live. If you give me that much, we can work together.

The way I figure it, my work habits are applicable to everyone. You'll find that I'm a stickler about preparation. My daily routines are transactional. Everything that happens in my day is a transaction between the external world and my internal world. Everything is raw material. Everything is relevant. **Everything is usable.** Everything feeds into my creativity. But without proper preparation, I cannot see it, retain it, and use it. Without the time and effort invested in getting ready to create, you can be hit by the thunderbolt and it'll just leave you stunned.

Take, for example, a wonderful scene in the film *The Karate Kid*. The teenaged Daniel asks the wise and wily Mr. Miyagi to teach him karate. The old man

agrees and orders Daniel first to wax his car in precisely opposed circular motions ("Wax on, wax off"). Then he tells Daniel to paint his wooden fence in precise up and down motions. Finally, he makes Daniel hammer nails to repair a wall. Daniel is puzzled at first, then angry. He wants to learn the martial arts so he can defend himself. Instead he is confined to household chores. When Daniel is finished restoring Miyagi's car, fence, and walls, he explodes with rage at his "mentor." Miyagi physically attacks Daniel, who without thought or hesitation defends himself with the core thrusts and parries of karate. Through Miyagi's deceptively simple chores, Daniel has absorbed the basics of karate—without knowing it.

In the same spirit as Miyagi teaches karate, I hope this book will help you be more creative. I can't guarantee that everything you'll create will be wonderful—that's up to you—but I do promise that if you read through the book and heed even half the suggestions, you'll never be afraid of a blank page or an empty canvas or a white room again. Creativity will become your habit.

stretch and warm up their muscles and put their bodies through the classic dance positions. They do this daily, without fail, because all dancers working in class know that their efforts at strengthening the muscles will armor them against injury in rehearsal or performance. What makes it a ritual is that they do it without questioning the need.

As with all sacred rites, the beginning of class is beautiful to watch. The dancers may straggle in and mill about, but they eventually assume, with frighteningly formal rigor, their customary place at the barre or on the floor. If a principal dancer walks in, they automatically shift places to give the star the center spot facing the mirror. Of such beliefs and traditions are rituals made. It's like going to church. We rarely question why we go to church, and we don't expect concrete answers when we do. We just know it feeds our spirit somehow, and so we do it.

A lot of habitually creative people have preparation rituals linked to the setting in which they choose to start their day. By putting themselves into that environment, they begin their creative day.

The composer Igor Stravinsky did the same thing every morning when he entered his studio to work: He sat at the piano and played a Bach fugue. Perhaps he needed the ritual to feel like a musician, or the playing somehow connected him to musical notes, his vocabulary. Perhaps he was honoring his hero, Bach, and seeking his blessing for the day. Perhaps it was nothing more than a simple method to get his fingers moving, his motor running, his mind thinking music. But repeating the routine each day in the studio induced some lick that got him started.

I know a chef who begins each day in the meticulously tended urban garden that dominates the tiny terrace of his Brooklyn home. He is obsessed with fresh ingredients, particularly herbs, spices, and flowers. Spending the first minutes of the day among his plants is his ideal creative environment for thinking about new

flavor combinations and dishes. He putters about, feeling connected to nature, and this gets him going. Once he picks a vegetable or herb, he can't let it sit there. He has to head off to the restaurant and start cooking.

A painter I know can't do anything in her studio without propulsive music pounding out of the speakers. Turning it on turns on a switch inside her. The beat gets her into a groove. It's the metronome for her creative life.

A writer friend can only write outside. He can't stand the thought of being chained indoors to his word processor while a "great day" is unfolding outside. He fears he's missing something stirring in the air. So he lives in Southern California and carries his coffee mug out to work in the warmth of an open porch in his backyard. Mystically, he now believes he is missing nothing.

In the end, there is no one ideal condition for creativity. What works for one person is useless for another. The only criterion is this: Make it easy on yourself. Find a working environment where the prospect of wrestling with your muse doesn't scare you, doesn't shut you down. It should make you want to be there, and once you find it, stick with it. **To get the creative habit, you need a working environment that's habit-forming.**

All preferred working states, no matter how eccentric, have one thing in common: When you enter into them, they impel you to get started. Whether it's the act of carrying a hot coffee mug to an outdoor porch, or the rock 'n' roll that gets a painter revved up to splash color on a canvas, or the stillness of an herb garden that puts a chef in a culinary trance, moving inside each of these routines gives you no choice but to *do something*. It's Pavlovian: follow the routine, get a creative payoff.

Athletes know the power of a triggering ritual. A pro golfer may walk along the fairway chatting with his caddie, his playing partner, a friendly official or score-

keeper, but when he stands behind the ball and takes a deep breath, he has signaled to himself that it's time to concentrate. A basketball player comes to the free-throw line, touches his socks, his shorts, receives the ball, bounces it exactly three times, and then he is ready to rise and shoot, exactly as he's done a hundred times a day in practice. By making the start of the sequence automatic, they replace doubt and fear with comfort and routine.

It worked for Beethoven, too, as these sketches, rendered between 1820 and 1825 by J. D. Böhm, show. Although he was not physically fit, Beethoven would start each day with the same ritual: a morning walk during which he would scribble into a pocket sketchbook the first rough notes of whatever musical idea inevitably entered his head. Having done that, having limbered up his mind and transported himself into his version of a trance zone during the walk, he would return to his room and get to work.

As for me, my preferred working state is thermal—I need heat—and my preferred ritual is getting warm. That's why I start my day at the gym. I am in perpetual pursuit of body warmth. It can never be too hot for me. Even in the middle of sweltering August, when the rest of New York is half frozen in the comforts of air-conditioning, I have all the windows and doors of my apartment wide open as if to say, "Hello, heat!" I loathe air-conditioning. I like skin that is just about to break out in glistening sweat.

There's also a psychological component to heat: It calls up the warmth of the hearth and home. In a word, it says "mother," which is all about feeling safe and secure. A warm, secure dancer can work without fear. In that state of physical and psychic warmth, dancers touch their moments of greatest physical potential. They're not afraid to try new movements. They can trust their bodies, and that's when magic happens. When they're not warm, dancers are afraid—afraid of injury, afraid of looking bad to others, afraid they're falling short of the inner bar they set for themselves. That's a rotten state to be in.

There's a practical reason for this, of course. Unlike

other art forms, dance is all about physical movement and exertion. Even in my sixties, I need to keep my muscles in a state of readiness to pursue my craft, so that when I demonstrate a step in rehearsal I can actually execute it with some amplitude and grace and not hurt myself. Every athlete knows this: warm up before playing or you'll pull a muscle. If I am warm, I feel I can do anything.

My morning workout ritual is the most basic form of self-reliance; it reminds me that, when all else fails, I can at least depend on myself. It's my algebra of self-reliance: I depend on my body in order to work, and I am more productive if my body is strong. My daily workout is a part of my preparation for work.

This, more than anything else, is what rituals of preparation give us: They arm us with confidence and self-reliance. The talent agent Sam Cohn tells a story about an entertainment lawyer named Burton Meyer who taught him a great lesson through a daily ritual. Cohn was working at CBS at the time, and Meyer thought he was working too hard for CBS and not enjoying himself enough. "You're overcommitted," he told Cohn. "You know, I practice law for fun. I don't have to do this. And I'll tell you how that came about. Ever since I was a young lawyer, each day I would come back from lunch and I would close my office door, I would sit in my chair, and for one hour I would quietly ruminate on one question. And the question was this: Burt, what's in it for you?"

A ritual of asking "What's in it for me?" might not provide the most open-minded philosophy of life, but it will keep you focused on your goals. Taken to extremes, it's an unattractive way of seeing the world, but it does place your motivation right smack in front of you.

When I walk into the white room I am alone, but I am alone with my:

**body ambition ideas passions needs memories goals
prejudices distractions fears**

These ten items are at the heart of who I am. What-

ever I'm going to create will be a reflection of how these have shaped my life, and how I've learned to channel my experiences into them.

The last two—distractions and fears—are the dangerous ones. They're the habitual demons that invade the launch of every project. No one starts a creative endeavor without a certain amount of fear; the key is to learn how to keep free-floating fears from paralyzing you before you've begun. When I feel that sense of dread, I try to make it as specific as possible. Let me tell you my five big fears:

- 1. People will laugh at me.**
- 2. Someone has done it before.**
- 3. I have nothing to say.**
- 4. I will upset someone I love.**
- 5. Once executed, the idea will never be as good as it is in my mind.**

These are mighty demons, but they're hardly unique to me. You probably share some. If I let them, they'll shut down my impulses ("No, you can't do that") and perhaps turn off the spigots of creativity altogether. So I combat my fears with a staring-down ritual, like a boxer looking his opponent right in the eye before a bout.

1. People will laugh at me? Not the people I respect; they haven't yet, and they're not going to start now. (Some others have. London's *Evening Standard* from 1966: "Three girls, one of them named Twyla Tharp, appeared at the Albert Hall last evening and threatened to do the same tonight." So what? Thirty-seven years later I'm still here.)

2. Someone has done it before? Honey, it's *all* been done before. Nothing's really original. Not Homer or Shakespeare and certainly not you. Get over yourself.

3. I have nothing to say? An irrelevant fear. We all have something to say. Plus, you're panicking too soon. If the dancers don't walk out on you, chances are the audience won't either.

4. I will upset someone I love? A serious worry that is not easily exorcised or stared down because you never know how loved ones will respond to your creation. The best you can do is remind yourself that you're a good person with good intentions. You're trying to create unity, not discord. See the curtain call. See the people standing up. Hear the crowd roaring.

5. Once executed, the idea will never be as good as it is in my mind? Toughen up. Leon Battista Alberti, a fifteenth-century architectural theorist, said, "Errors accumulate in the sketch and compound in the model." But better an imperfect dome in Florence than cathedrals in the clouds.

In those long and sleepless nights when I'm unable to shake my fears sufficiently, I borrow a biblical epigraph from Dostoyevsky's *The Demons*: I see my fears being cast into the bodies of wild boars and hogs, and I watch them rush to a cliff where they fall to their deaths.

It's a little more extreme than counting sheep, but it's far more effective for me.

This is a head game, of course. What ritual isn't? Maybe it's a little pathetic that after all this time I need this sort of pep talk to deal with my demons, but the unknown is a fearful place, and anything new is a step into the unknown. That fear is why ancient cultures created rituals in the first place. They lived in constant fear of other tribes, of predatory animals, of nature and the weather, all of which they believed were controlled by one or many awesome and awful deities. They hoped to gain control over their food supply, their herds, their fertility, their safety—their fears—by appeasing the gods with rituals. They would kill a certain kind of ani-

mal, and bleed it in a special way, and stack it on a fire, and toss some more animals into the flame, and offer the blood in a gold flask to the heavens—because doing so would guarantee a healthy crop or victory in battle. Rituals seduced the primitive tribes into believing they could control the uncontrollable.

Centuries later, the ancient rituals seem silly (unless, of course, you believe in them). But are they that much different from all the rituals, big and small, that we employ to get through the day? I remember being a very ritualistic kid. I think most kids are. Eager to gain some control over their lives, they concoct games and rites to add sense and form to their world. The dolls have to sit a certain way on the bed. The socks go on their feet before the pants. The walk to school has to be on the north side of the street; the walk back home has to retrace the steps perfectly. When I said my prayers as a child, I was convinced that I had to say so many words during the exhale and so many words on the inhale, or something bad would happen. Weird, right? Not really. Though less brutal, it's not that far removed from slaughtering a cow and offering it to an unseen god to ensure rain.

I know a writer who looks for something to clean around the house when the words aren't coming out. As he sits in front of his computer, feeling stale and stalled, everything around him looks grimy and caked with dust. So he grabs a rag and a spray bottle of Fantastik and gets to work on the crud. When everything is clean and shiny, he sits back down at the screen and the words invariably flow.

He has a sophisticated explanation for why this ritual works, involving neural pathways and emotions and identity and self-worth. The job of a writer, he says, is simple: You write what's in your head. But it becomes an emotional challenge when you can't corral the words into coherent thoughts. Suddenly you doubt yourself. As you wallow in self-doubt, you turn away from the computer screen and see dirt that you hadn't noticed before (certainly not when the work was going well and you didn't need to turn away from the screen); the dirt becomes inextricably linked with the self-doubt, and

wiping away the grime cathartically wipes away the self-doubt. The emotional crisis is solved. Let the writing begin.

Personally, I think the key to his cleaning ritual is the fact that he gets up and moves. Movement stimulates our brains in ways we don't appreciate. But I give some credence to his cute metaphorical link between dirt and doubt. It might be mumbo jumbo, but mystery and mumbo jumbo are a big part of ritual, too. And if it works, why question it.

I know a businessman who has a ritual of unfolding a dollar bill at the start of each deal and staring at it in silence for a moment, because there on the bill, opposite the Great Seal with the bald eagle and the overly ripe **E Pluribus Unum**, above the mysteriously cropped pyramid with the floating eye, is the motto **Annuit coeptis**: "Providence has favored our undertakings." To some, this might seem superstitious, but a superstition is nothing more than a ritual repeated religiously. The habit, and the faith invested in it, converts it into an act that provides comfort and strength. Every business deal is an act of courage and faith to this executive, and the motto on the dollar bill is his blessing.



The mechanism by which we convert the chemistry of pessimism into optimism is still uncharted. But we do know how debilitating negativity can be and, likewise, how productive optimism is. I am no stranger to pessimism and fear. They can descend on me at night, during those 3:00 A.M. sessions when I can't sleep and I'm consumed by my litany of "issues." My mind flits from the major issues of how to cope with everything I want to do, to the minor housekeeping details of going to a manicurist to repair my splitting fingernails. At times like this, priorities go astray; a trifle, such as my nails, can leap into the foreground of my fears. I swoon deeper and deeper into a fog of self-doubt and confu-

sion. But rituals help me clear the fog.

The other obstacle to good work, as harmful as one's fears, is distractions.

I know there are people who can assimilate a lot of incoming data from all angles—from newspapers and magazines, movies, television, music, friends, the Internet—and turn it into something wonderful. They thrive on a multitude of stimuli, the more complicated the better. I'm not hard-wired that way. When I commit to a project, I don't expand my contact with the world; I try to cut it off. I want to place myself in a bubble of monomaniacal absorption where I'm fully invested in the task at hand.

As a result, I find I'm often subtracting things from my life rather than adding them. I've turned that into a ritual as well. I list the biggest distractions in my life and make a pact with myself to do without them for a week. Here are some perennially tempting distractions that I cut out:

Movies: This is painful, because I love films and cutting them out costs me something. My parents owned a drive-in movie theater in San Bernardino, California, and I spent a huge part of my childhood working there watching movies. But when I'm absorbed by a project, unless I'm looking at a film to learn something specific, I don't go to movie theaters and I don't rent videos. If I started watching movies for pleasure, I'd become addicted. I'd watch all day and never get anything done.

Multitasking: In an accelerated, overachieving world, we all take pride in our ability to do two or more things at the same time: working on vacation; using an elegant dinner to hammer out a business deal; reading while we're groaning on the StairMaster. The irony of multitasking is that it's exhausting; when you're doing two or three things simultaneously, you use more energy than the sum of energy required to do each task independently. You're also cheating yourself because you're not doing anything excel-

lently. You're compromising your virtuosity. In the words of T. S. Eliot, you're "distracted from distractions by distractions."

It's a challenge to cut out multitasking because we all get a frisson of satisfaction from being able to keep several balls in the air at once. But one week without multitasking is worth it; the increased focus and awareness are their own rewards.

Numbers: More than anything, I can live without numbers—the ones on clocks, dials, meters, bathroom scales, bills, contracts, tax forms, bank statements, and royalty reports. For one week I tell myself to "stop counting." I don't look at anything with a number in it. This is not that great a hardship; it means mostly that I don't have to deal with grinding business details. The goal is to give the left side of the brain—the hemisphere that does the counting—a rest and let the more intuitive right hemisphere come to the fore.

Background Music: I know there are artists who like music in the background when they work; they use the music to block out everything else. They're not listening to it; it's there as a form of companionship. I don't need a soundtrack to accompany my life. Music in the background nibbles away at your awareness. It's comforting, perhaps, but who said tapping into your awareness was supposed to be comfortable? And who knows how much of your brainpower and intuition the Muzak is draining? When I listen to music, I don't multitask; I simply listen. Part of it is my job: I listen to music to see if I can dance to it. But another part is simple courtesy to the composer. I listen with the same intensity the composer exerted to string the notes together. I'd expect the same from anyone watching my work. I certainly wouldn't approve if someone read a book while my dancers were performing.

I don't recommend living without distractions as a permanent lifestyle for anyone. It's too monastic. But

anyone can do it for a week, and the payoff will surprise you.

It's a simple equation: Subtracting your dependence on some of the things you take for granted increases your independence. It's liberating, forcing you to rely on your own ability rather than your customary crutches.

There's an American tradition of giving things up to foster self-reliance. Ralph Waldo Emerson was a man of the world who sought solitude and simplicity. Henry David Thoreau turned his back on the distractions of life in society in pursuit of a better and clearer life, and found a rich vein of inspiration and invention in the Massachusetts woods. Emily Dickinson lived as quiet and constricted a life as one can imagine, and channeled her energies directly into her poetry. All three

sought lives apart from the hubbub of the city's commerce—and they didn't even have to cope with the roar of the car, the drone of the radio, the blur of television, or the information surfeit of the Internet.

The act of giving something up does not merely clear time and mental space to focus you. It's a ritual, too, an offering where you sacrifice a portion of your life to the metaphoric gods of creation. Instead of goats or cattle, we're sacrificing television or music or numbers—and what is a sacrifice but a ritual?

When you have selected the environment that works for you, developed the start-up ritual that impels you forward every day, faced down your fears, and put your distractions in their proper place, you have cleared the first hurdle. You have begun to prepare to begin.

Chapter 3

your creative DNA

In my early years in New York City, I studied with the choreographer Merce Cunningham. Merce had a corner studio on the second floor at 14th Street and Eighth Avenue, with windows on two sides. During breaks in classes, I watched a lot of traffic out of those windows, and I observed that the traffic patterns were just like Merce's dances—both appear random and chaotic, but they're not. It occurred to me that Merce often looked out of those windows, too. I'm sure the street pattern was consoling to him, reinforcing his discordant view of the world. His dances are all about chaos and dysfunction. That's his creative DNA. He's very comfortable with chaos and plays with it in all his work. My hunch is that he came to chaos before he came to that studio, but I can't help wondering if maybe he selected the place because of the chaos outside the windows.

Of course, when I looked out those windows, I didn't see the patterns the way Merce did, and I certainly didn't find solace in their discordance. I didn't "get it" the way he did. I wasn't hard-wired that way. It wasn't part of my creative DNA.

I believe that we all have strands of *creative code* hard-wired into our imaginations. These strands are as solidly imprinted in us as the genetic code that determines our height and eye color, except they govern our creative impulses. They determine the forms we work in, the stories we tell, and how we tell them. I'm not Watson and Crick; I can't prove this. But perhaps you

also suspect it when you try to understand why you're a photographer, not a writer, or why you always insert a happy ending into your story, or why all your canvases gather the most interesting material at the edges, not the center. In many ways, that's why art historians and literature professors and critics of all kinds have jobs: to pinpoint the artist's DNA and explain to the rest of us whether the artist is being true to it in his or her work. I call it DNA; you may think of it as your creative hard-wiring or personality.

When I apply a critic's temperament to myself, to see if I'm being true to my DNA, I often think in terms of focal length, like that of a camera lens. All of us find comfort in seeing the world either from a great distance, at arm's length, or in close-up. We don't consciously make that choice. Our DNA does, and we generally don't waver from it. Rare is the painter who is equally adept at miniatures and epic series, or the writer who is at home in both historical sagas and finely observed short stories.

The photographer Ansel Adams, whose black-and-white panoramas of the unspoiled American West became the established notion of how to "see" nature (and, no small feat, helped spawn the environmental movement in the United States), is an example of an artist who was compelled to view the world from a great distance. He found solace in lugging his heavy camera on long treks into the wilderness or to a mountaintop so he could have the widest view of land and sky. Earth and heaven in their most expansive form was how Adams saw the world. It was his signature, an expression of his creative temperature. It was his DNA.

Focal length doesn't only apply to photographers. It applies to any artist.

The choreographer Jerome Robbins, whom I have worked with and admire, tended to see the world from a middle distance. The sweeping vision was not for him. Robbins's point of view was right there on the stage. Others besides me have noted how often Robbins had his dancers watch someone else dance. Think of his very first ballet, *Fancy Free*. Boys watch girls. Girls then watch boys. And upstage, the bartender watches every-

thing as if he were Robbins's surrogate. His is the point of view from which the ballet's story is told. Robbins is both observing and observed, safely, at a middle distance.

It helps to know that Robbins grew up wanting to be a puppeteer, and I think this way of seeing the world—controlling events from behind the scenes or above, but not so distant that you cannot maintain contact with the action on stage—pervades almost everything he created. I doubt it was something he chose consciously, but in terms of creative DNA, it was a dominant strand in his work. Check out the film of *West Side Story*, which Robbins choreographed and co-directed. The story line is famously adapted from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*—in other words, it's not his own. Yet even with a borrowed plot, you still see Robbins's impulses coming to the fore, imprinting themselves on the drama and the dancing. Nearly every group scene involves performers being observed. Jets watch Sharks, Sharks watch Jets, girls watch boys, boys watch girls. This is not how Shakespeare did it. But it is Robbins's worldview.

Other artists see the world as if it is one inch from their nose. The novelist Raymond Chandler, whose Philip Marlowe books like *Farewell, My Lovely* and *The Long Goodbye* are classics of American hardboiled detective fiction, was obsessed with detail. He works in extreme close-up, a succession of tight shots that practically put us inside the characters' skulls. The plots of his stories are often incomprehensible—he believed that the only way to keep the reader from knowing whodunit was not to know yourself—but his eye for descriptive detail was razor-sharp. Here is the opening of his first full-length novel, *The Big Sleep*:

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid October, with the sun not shining and a look of hard wet rain in the clearness of the foothills. I was wearing my powder-blue suit, with dark blue shirt, tie and display handkerchief, black brogues, black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them. I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn't care who knew it. It was everything the well-dressed private

detective ought to be. I was calling on four million dollars.

Chandler kept lists of observed details from his life and from the people he knew: a necktie file, a shirt file, a list of overheard slang expressions, as well as character names, titles, and one-liners he intended to use sometime in the future. He wrote on half-sheets of paper, just twelve to fifteen lines per page, with a self-imposed quota that each sheet must contain what he called "a little bit of magic." The "life" in his stories was in the details, whether his hero Marlowe was idling in his office or in the middle of a brutal confrontation. No long-distance musings on the state of the world. No middle-distance group shots. Just a steady stream of details, piling one on top of the other, until a character or scene takes shape and a vivid picture emerges. Up close was Chandler's focal length. If some people like to wander through an art museum standing back from the paintings, taking in the effect the artist was trying to achieve, while others need a closer look because they're interested in the details, then Chandler was the kind of museum-goer who pressed his nose up to the canvas to see how the artist applied his strokes. Obviously, all of us look at paintings from each of these vantage points, but we focus best at some specific spot along the spectrum.

I don't mean to get too caught up in observational focal length. It's one facet out of many that makes up an artist's creative identity. Yet once you see it, you begin to notice how it defines all the artists you admire. The sweeping themes of Mahler's symphonies are the work of a composer with a wide vision. He sees grand architecture from a distance. Contrast that with a miniaturist like Satie, whose delicate compositions reveal a man in love with detail. (It's only the giants like Bach, Cézanne, and Shakespeare who could work in many focal lengths.)

But that's the point. Each of us is hard-wired a certain way. And that hardwiring insinuates itself into our work. That's not a bad thing. Actually, it's what the world expects from you. We want our artists to take

the mundane materials of our lives, run it through their imaginations, and surprise us. If you are by nature a loner, a crusader, an outsider, a jester, a romantic, a melancholic, or any one of a dozen personalities, that quality will shine through in your work.

Robert Benchley wrote that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don't. I guess I've always been one who does.

I have issues with ambiguity, preferring my distinctions to be black or white. I don't like gray. That's how I am. I recognize, of course, that some people do like gray. (I also recognize that I'm doing it again—dividing the world into two kinds of people.) Thus, I am always making these clear distinctions in my work, my daily routines, my colleagues, and my goals. Dancers are either acceptable (great) or not (everything less than great). Producers are either good or evil. Colleagues are either committed or missing in action. Critics are either my friends or enemies. The polar distinctions can go on forever.

If one set of polarities defines my creative DNA, it is the way I find myself pulled between *involvement* and *detachment*.

I shuttle back and forth from one extreme to the other, with no rest in between. And I apply it to everything.

With my dancers, for example, I have an annoying need for proof of their allegiance to me and my projects. So I'm always running through a mental checklist to see if their work habits are as exacting as mine, searching with forensic intensity for evidence of their commitment. Do they show up on time for rehearsal? Are they warmed up? Does their energy flag when rehearsals break down or are they committed to pushing forward? Are they bringing ideas to the party or waiting for me to provide everything? These are my personal pop quizzes to gauge other people's involvement. I don't want them merely involved. I'm looking for insane commitment.

I'm no less strict with myself. I'm always taking temperature readings of my commitment to a project

and pushing myself to be more committed than anyone else. At its extreme, I put myself at the center of a piece, even as a dancer, trying on the roles.

When I've learned all I can at the core of a piece, I pull back and become the Queen of Detachment. I move so far back that I become a surrogate for the audience. I see the work the way they will see it. New, fresh, objectively. In the theater, I frequently go to the back and watch the dancers rehearse. If I could watch from farther away, from outside the theater in the street, I would. That's how much detachment I need from my work in order to understand it.

This impulse comes naturally. I grew up in the foothills of San Bernardino, where there was no community to speak of, no neighbors and playmates. I watched movies in a drive-in theater from a distance. I was even distanced from my twin brothers and my sister, who were all younger than I. They lived at one end of our house, I lived at the other so I could be free to maintain my rigorous practice schedule alone. You could even say I was detached from my world by my schedule. That's why detachment is part of my DNA. I was born with it, and it was continually drummed into me thereafter.

Was it there from the start? Who's to say, but my mother told me that at birth I was a noisy, ill-mannered baby in the hospital. The only way the nurses could shut me up was to put me out in the hallway by myself where I could see everything going on around me. I quieted down instantly. Even then, I didn't want to be on the inside, crowded with other people. I wanted to be on the outside, watching.

For the longest time, I thought this dichotomy of involvement versus detachment was merely a template for my work habits. Immerse yourself in the details of the work. Commit yourself to mastering every aspect. At the same time, step back to see if the work scans, if it's intelligible to an unwashed audience. Don't get so involved that you lose what you're trying to say. This was the yin and yang of my work life: **Dive in. Step back. Dive in. Step back.**

It was how I saw the world—like being nearsighted

rather than having 20/20 vision. I was stuck with it.

And then one day, reading Carl Kerenyi's *Dionysos*, I discovered a broader context for these divisions. Involvement and detachment explained how I worked, but they didn't explain why I produced the work I did. It had always irked me that my dances shied away from telling a story, and when I tried my hand at a narrative-driven dance, the result was weak or unfocused. Why was that? Why was I better at one than the other? An answer came from the ancient Greeks, who had two words, *zoe* and *bios*, to distinguish the two competing natures I felt within myself.

Zoe and *bios* both mean life in Greek, but they are not synonymous. *Zoe*, wrote Kerenyi, refers to "life in general, without characterization." *Bios* characterizes a specific life, the outlines that distinguish one living thing from another. *Bios* is the Greek root for "biography," *zoe* for "zoology."

I cannot overstate what a profound distinction this was. Suddenly, two states of experience were made plain to me.

Zoe is like seeing Earth from space. You get the sense of life on the rotating globe, but without a sense of the individual lives being lived on the planet. *Bios* involves swooping down from space from the perch of a high-powered spy satellite, closing in on the scene, and seeing the details. *Bios* distinguishes between one life and another. *Zoe* refers to the aggregate.

Bios accommodates the notion of death, that each life has a beginning, middle, and end, that each life contains a story. *Zoe*, wrote Kerenyi, "does not admit of the experience of its own destruction: it is experienced without end, as infinite life."

The difference between *zoe* and *bios* is like the difference between sacred and profane. Sacred art is *zoe*-driven; profane art stems from *bios*.

I realize that these are just words. But they articulated a distinction that made my entire creative output clearer. Applying it to two of my choreographic heroes, Robbins and George Balanchine, I could appreciate in a new way the difference between these two men.

Balanchine was the essence of *zoe*. Most of his

ballets are beautiful plotless structures that mirror the music rather than interpret it. They do not need language to explain themselves, nor do they try to tell a story. Their content is the essence of life, not the details of living. Balanchine's steps and gestures are not specific—for example, a man miming the act of pulling out an imaginary chair for a woman or, more tritely, putting hands to heart to express love. People think his dances are abstract at first—where's the story? what's the plot? But their *zoe* qualities reveal themselves with powerful results. Balanchine's gestures and steps pluck chords in us that we cannot easily name. Yet they resonate. They seem familiar. That's the genius of Balanchine. In his movement he created a grammar that expressed congruencies between the natural world and our emotional world. Three women unbundle their long hair at the end of *Serenade* and we feel something, without attaching a name to it, because there is a common structure between the dancers' gestures and some gesture we remember that moved us.

Robbins, on the other hand, was pure *bios*—and brilliant at it. When he created a dance, he was always accumulating details about the roles—from what the characters would wear to whom they were sleeping with—and out of these details of life he would construct an engaging narrative. This is why he had such a crowd-pleasing career in the theater. (This is a giant gift. Mike Nichols tells a story about getting the musical *Annie* ready for Broadway. A scene that was supposed to be funny was failing to get laughs, no matter what Nichols tried. He asked Robbins to watch the scene with his practiced eye. Afterward, Nichols asked him how to fix the scene. Robbins surveyed the stage and pointed to a white towel hanging at the back of the set. "That towel should be yellow," he said. "That's it?" thought Nichols. "That makes the scene work?" But he made the change and the scene got a laugh every night thereafter.)

As a man of *bios*, a master of details, he could tell a story that had, as a subtext, what Balanchine made a text of—namely, life.

One approach was not more valid than the other.

The two men simply entered their work through different doors.

But I could see that everything I did was a duel between the warring impulses of *bios* and *zoe* in me. On the one hand, there was my ability to create dances about a life force. On the other, there was my occasional urge to break away from this and create dances that tell a specific story. The first kind of dances came naturally to me, the latter required more of an effort. In my heart I am a woman more of *zoe* than of *bios*.

I suspect many people never get a handle on their creative identity this way. They take their urges, their biases, their work habits for granted. But a little self-knowledge goes a long way. If you understand the strands of your creative DNA, you begin to see how they mutate into common threads in your work. You begin to see the “story” that you’re trying to tell; why you do the things you do (both positive and self-destructive); where you are strong and where you are weak (which prevents a lot of false starts), and how you see the world and function in it.

Take the following questionnaire. If even one answer tells you something new about yourself, you’re one step closer to understanding your creative DNA. There are no right or wrong answers here. The exercise is intended for your eyes only, which means no cheating, no answers to impress other people. It’s supposed to be an honest self-appraisal of what matters to you. Anything less is a distortion. I include it here and urge you to answer quickly, instinctively. Don’t dawdle.

(To get you started, I give you my answers on chapter 3.)

Your Creative Autobiography

1. What is the first creative moment you remember?
2. Was anyone there to witness or appreciate it?
3. What is the best idea

you’ve ever had?

4. What made it great in your mind?
5. What is the dumbest idea?
6. What made it stupid?
7. Can you connect the dots that led you to this idea?
8. What is your creative ambition?
9. What are the obstacles to this ambition?
10. What are the vital steps to achieving this ambition?
11. How do you begin your day?
12. What are your habits? What patterns do you repeat?
13. Describe your first successful creative act.
14. Describe your second successful creative act.
15. Compare them.
16. What are your attitudes toward: money, power, praise, rivals, work, play?
17. Which artists do you admire most?
18. Why are they your role models?
19. What do you and your role models have in common?
20. Does anyone in your life regularly inspire you?
21. Who is your muse?
22. Define muse.
23. When confronted with superior intelligence or talent, how do you respond?
24. When faced with stupidity, hostility, intransigence,

laziness, or indifference in others, how do you respond?

25. When faced with impending success or the threat of failure, how do you respond?

26. When you work, do you love the process or the result?

27. At what moments do you feel your reach exceeds your grasp?

28. What is your ideal creative activity?

29. What is your greatest fear?

30. What is the likelihood of either of the answers to the previous two questions happening?

31. Which of your answers would you most like to change?

32. What is your idea of mastery?

33. What is your greatest dream?

I devised this questionnaire because it forces us to go back to our origins, our earliest memories, our first causes. We change through life, but we cannot deny our sources, and this test is one way to recall those roots.

The better you know yourself, the more you will know when you are playing to your strengths and when you are sticking your neck out. Venturing out of your comfort zone may be dangerous, yet you do it anyway because our ability to grow is directly proportional to an ability to entertain the uncomfortable.

I've always admired the playwright Neil Simon. In economic terms and mass acceptance, he's probably the most successful playwright of the twentieth century. He wrote beautifully constructed parlor comedies that

provided a laugh every twenty seconds. That was his gift, and it was a rare talent. I'm sure there are snobs who tried to dismiss Neil Simon as a joke mechanic producing a hit a year. I don't see it that way. I look over his enormous output—three dozen plays, a dozen original screenplays—and see a paragon of habitual creativity. More to the point, I see a writer constantly stretching. He pushed his talent more than most people appreciate. He didn't go against his nature and try to write dramas like Eugene O'Neill—he was too smart for that—but he was always injecting into his plays dark elements and serious themes that tested his abilities and made his audience stretch, too. Where his strengths for comedy could cover his experiments, his stretches, he knew he could go for it. There is a large gap in time and ambition between *Barefoot in the Park* in 1961 and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Lost in Yonkers* in 1990. But both plays are recognizably Neil Simon. He had a good sense of who he was and how far he could venture beyond his comfort zone.

Another thing about knowing who you are is that you know what you should not be doing, which can save you a lot of heartaches and false starts if you catch it early on.

I was giving a lecture to students at Vassar not long ago. Working with the students' autobiographies, I invited a dance student, a music student who brought his saxophone, and an art student to join me on stage. I asked the dancer to improvise some movement from a tuck position on the floor. I asked the saxophone player to accompany the dancer. And I asked the art student to assign colors to what they were doing. I admit I was constructing a three-ring circus in the lecture hall. But my goal was to bring the three students together by forcing them to work off the same page, and also to free them up to discover how far they could go improvising on this simple assignment.

When I asked the art student to read out loud his color impressions, everyone in the hall was taken aback. He droned on and on about himself, feelings he'd had, stories about friends. Not a word about color. Finally I heard "limpid blue" come out of his mouth. I waved my

arms, signaling him to stop reading.

"Do you realize," I said, "that you've just recited about five hundred words in an assignment about color. You've covered everything under the sun, and 'limpid blue' is the first time you've mentioned a color? I'm not convinced you want to be a painter."

As far as I was concerned, this young man was in "DNA denial." I gave him a painterly exercise and he gave me a text-heavy response. A young man with painting in his genes would be rattling off colors immediately. Instead, his vivid use of language—limpid blue does not come in tubes—suggested that he really ought to be a writer.

It would be presumptuous of me to think I had him pegged for a writer, not a painter, after that brief encounter. But if I got him to re-examine what he's built for, then he was a step or two ahead of most people.

I had a similar moment in my early years as a choreographer. I was at my worktable making sketches of dancers and their costumes. As I leaned back to admire the sketches, there was a fleeting moment when I actually whispered to myself "I could have been a painter."

I wonder how many people get sidetracked from their true calling by the fact that they have talent to excel at more than one artistic medium. This is a curse rather than a blessing. If you have only one option, you

can't make a wrong choice. If you have two options, you have a fifty percent chance of being wrong.

It's like a great high school athlete who plays football, basketball, and baseball equally well. If this athlete wants to continue playing sports at the highest collegiate level, at some point he will have to commit to one sport over the others. He'll weigh a lot of factors: what comes naturally to him, what does he enjoy the most, in which sport does he have a natural advantage over the competition in terms of size, speed, endurance, and other critical measures? But in the end the choice should be based on pure instinct and self-knowledge. What sport does he feel in his muscles and bones? What sport was he born to play?

In my case, I fortunately banished the "I could have been a painter" thought out of my mind as quickly as it had appeared. Maybe I did have a talent for interpreting the world visually. Maybe I did have a knack for creating visual tableaux that entertained people. Maybe I did know how to arrange colors and objects in space. All of these are skills from the painter's tool kit. But even then I knew myself well enough to realize that no matter how much I enjoyed making sketches, the painter's life was not for me. I didn't feel it in my bones. I would tell my "story" through movement. Gotta dance.