

THE CREATIVE FIGHT

CREATE YOUR BEST WORK AND LIVE THE LIFE YOU IMAGINE



CHRIS ORWIG

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Peachpit Press

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Chris Orwig

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*For my father,
who taught me how to fight the good fight
and live for a higher ideal.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS





INTRODUCTION

vi

PART 1: BEGIN

- Not What It Seems — 3
- Defining the Fight — 9
- The Ladder — 13
- Creativity in Spite of Age — 19
- Creativity and Sliced Bread — 27
- Twinkies, a Frog, and Grapes — 33
- Einstein’s Game of Connecting the Dots — 39
- Critical Creativity — 45

PART 2: THE JOURNEY

- Blind Passion — 55
- Magnetic North — 59
- The Vow — 65
- Beautiful Mistakes — 69
- The Creative Flow — 75
- Survival — 81
- Lucky You — 87
- Talent or Tenacity — 95

PART 3: DRIVE

- There and Back Again — 105
- Why Versus What — 111
- Slow Is Fast — 117
- Good to Great — 123
- Grit and Glory — 129
- The Burnt Book — 137
- Unstuck and Free — 145
- The Missing Muse — 151

PART 4: THRIVE

- Picture Perfect — 161
- Silence and Solitude — 169
- Distracted by Distractions — 175
- Habitat — 185
- The Creative Craft — 191
- Fuel the Fire — 199
- The Power of Play — 205
- Unlikely Education — 211

PART 5: TIME

- Keep the Edges Wild — 219
- Nothing to Lose — 225
- Ignite — 233
- Wake Up — 239
- The Brevity of Life — 245
- Iterate and Innovate — 255
- The Freedom of Constraint — 263
- Gratitude — 269

CONCLUSION

276

THANKS

277

INDEX

278

INTRODUCTION

“I am writing this book because we are all going to die.” — Jack Kerouac. I suppose that’s why all books are written. Books, whether the study of seashells or Shakespearean verse, help us to live. Books deepen our appreciation, awaken our senses, and strengthen our resolve to live in a meaningful way. This book is my attempt.

All creative acts, especially books, begin with uncertainty and risk. The lack of certainty provides a clearing for the creative impulse to grow. Free from the restraint of self-assured confidence, curiosity kicks in and we begin to wonder “What if?” and “Why?” It’s here that the creative spirit revs up and asks, “What can I do?” and “How can I make the most with what I have?”

Such questions help us grow. And the best part of writing this book is how it has shaped who I am. By narrowing my own focus on creativity it has enriched my life and clarified who I want to become. That’s what creativity does and that’s my hope for you—that it enlivens your soul and inspires you to live the life for which you are designed.

We are all born with natural capacities to create, and we all have creative potential of which we are unaware. Everyone, including you, has untapped potential that is patiently waiting inside. Yet the creative spark can easily get snuffed out. It must be tended to like a campfire on a cold and rainy day. Neglect it and it will quietly dwindle, dissipate, and die. Keep it alive and you will thrive. This book will point the way.

For starters, creativity isn’t something we passively receive. You have to go after it to claim its prize. Creativity requires fight. When we were young we were willing to take the risk and put in the time. Unfettered by self-doubt we created on demand. Now older, we’ve lost what we once had, unless we make the choice to change. It begins with deciding to stop waiting for inspiration and start taking action ourselves. When we begin the fight it’s like steel striking flint, and it deeply

affects what we create, how we see, and who we are. And when we begin pursuing living life as if it were a work of art, our creativity swells.

At first glance, riding this swell seems simple, easy, and fun. But this thinking falls short—the creative spark is a much more complex and unpredictable force. And the pursuit of creativity is a much more interesting and adventurous ride. To become more creative we need to unlearn old ideas—like the idea that creativity is a gift for an elite few or the myth that inspiration comes while we sit around. And we need to be reminded of what we easily forget, like the idea that creativity requires guts, confidence, and hard work and that creativity isn’t a gift but a life force that courses through our veins.

Creativity fuels a drive to live the life for which we were designed. It despises those who live half-hearted and half-lived lives. Creativity reaches for good, provokes change, and calls us to strive, stretch, and try. Yet such creative efforts require risk. Afraid of failure and uncertain how to move ahead, most of us have forgotten what to do. We want to become more creative, but we don’t know where to begin. Or worse, when inspired we don’t know how to keep the spark alive. This book can help.

This book will show you that becoming more creative isn’t just about thinking happy thoughts or using colorful crayons; the path to creativity is a much wider trail. As Plutarch wrote in the first century, “Music, to create harmony, must investigate discord.” And to help you become more creative, this book will investigate a range of topics, from climbing ladders to tenacity, grit, and death. The goal is to find melody amidst discord and to rekindle your fire for creating your best work and making the most of your time.

As nice as that sounds, this isn’t a book about thinking your way to happiness or wishing your way to a more fulfilled life. It is about effort and fight. The secrets to becoming more

creative are always accompanied by habit, practice, and work. As Theodore Roosevelt, an exemplar of the creative fight, once said, “I may be an average man but by George I work harder at it than the average man.” Average to excellent is up to you and it’s less about talent and more about drive.

So this book is written for those of us who are driven to live a better life. And it’s a guide for igniting and sustaining the spark no matter what you do or who you are. Yet this book can’t do anything by itself. It relies on you to take the lead. To give you a nudge, at the end of each chapter you’ll find exercises that provide reflection questions and practical steps. Use these questions as a springboard to create your own. Think of these as small sparks that can be used to ignite big flames.

Most importantly, this book will work only if you take action and respond. Read passively and the book will diminish to an interesting collection of stories and ideas. Overanalyze and you’ll miss the point. Creativity is not a problem to be solved but a practice to be enjoyed. Like a good travel book, it will become better when you take the journey yourself. The book invites you to join in.

And the best books are those that rarely stay pristine. Rather, they are worn thin from reading on the train and parched from being read in the sun. After some time these books resemble a vessel that has traveled far from home. Such

books become marked up and taken over by the readers so that it is no longer the author’s work but their own. That is my hope whether you’re reading this in digital or print form. This book is my gift to you. No longer mine, it’s now yours.

As you read, you’ll discover that the book isn’t a foolproof formula or a promise of increased creativity by following seven

simple steps. The creative fight is more fluid, flexible, and open than that—sometimes suggesting quiet and other times being loud; sometimes asking you to go slow and other times to sprint. Distrust anyone who tells you that creativity can be figured out. Creativity is a wild elusive force. You can’t trap it in a cage, but you can learn how to harness its strength. This book is your guide.

While you read, don’t hesitate to drop me a line. I would love to hear about your story and learn about the wisdom you have. You can send me a note (and find more resources) at the book companion site: thecreativefight.com. Lastly, I

hope that someday we cross paths so that we can compare notes and share what we have learned since this adventure began. Either way, let’s keep in touch.

Finally, I’m humbled and honored that you have picked up this book. May it be one that brings change and helps you find the ladder that leads to a more creative and meaningful life and emboldens you to accomplish your dreams.







CHAPTER TWELVE

BEAUTIFUL MISTAKES

It was a frigid winter night when Yo-Yo Ma almost dropped his 2.5-million-dollar instrument on the floor.

The sold-out theater was buzzing with excitement. A single wooden chair sat in the center of the stage. The audience hushed and then broke into applause as Yo-Yo Ma appeared. The concert began, and in the middle of a difficult song, Ma's cello suddenly slipped, and then again. On the third slip, it

really started to fall. Abruptly, Ma stopped and reached out to catch his 1773 Stradivarius before it hit the floor. The audience gasped. Everyone held their breath. Ma gave a sigh of relief and gracefully pulled the cello back into position. Then he pointed at the cello and wagged his finger as if to scold her mischievous act. The audience erupted into laughter. Ma smiled, straightened himself out, and continued to play.

THE PITFALLS OF PERFECTIONISM The way Yo-Yo Ma handled himself made that blunder become beautiful. He transformed an error into an act of grace. It changed the concert into a community event. After the recovery from the mistake, everyone in the audience was on his side. Yo-Yo Ma was no longer one of the world's top performers, he was a friend. The way he handled his error made us feel safe. To this day, that was one of most powerful and creative musical moments I've experienced in my life.

It was a simple act, embracing the mistake, but it was profound. Who does that? When I make a mistake in front of others, my face becomes flush and I get stressed. Yo-Yo Ma was the epitome of calm. Yet he wasn't just a Zen master who fluidly handled a problem; he was a creative genius who brought out harmony from discord. To do such a thing, it helps to have a deep sense of identity and a vision for a higher goal. Yo-Yo Ma had both. In one interview he said, "You don't play music for perfection. The point of music is to make someone feel." His performance did just that. Embracing that blunder, rather than trying to cover it up, brought warmth into that chilly room.

Perfectionism is made up of two parts: a drive for greatness, and fear. It's the fear and the shame, blame, and judgment that overwhelm. Mix those ingredients together and they become a bitter drink. Perfectionism poisons creativity. Some perfectionists never try to create because they are afraid of being wrong. But being creative requires that we let go of fear, get out of our comfort zone, and make mistakes. As the cliché goes, "Mistakes are proof that you are trying." Yet mistakes can also be proof that you haven't practiced very hard. Making mistakes is never enough.

I walked into one of my client's offices and saw a huge poster that said "Make Mistakes. Make Mistakes. Make Mistakes." At first glance I thought, "that's great." Then I stopped and thought some more. As I stood there I noticed that the poster was hanging in the finance department above the cubicle that belonged to the head of payroll. Instantly, I remembered that a number of my paychecks from this company had been wrong. Suddenly, the message on that poster didn't seem like such a good idea. Making financial mistakes isn't where creative genius is born.



CREATIVE GROWTH Although making mistakes is part of the creative process, it is never the goal. When Edison set out to invent the lightbulb, he desperately wanted to create one that worked. His team made countless mistakes and tested over 6000 types of filaments in trying to find something that would burn bright without going out. In our own drive to succeed, mistakes are inevitable. Yet fewer mistakes are better than more.

If the end game is creative growth, one of the quickest ways to get through mistakes is to have a higher goal. Sustained light is what drove Edison and his team to try so many different types of filament substances—everything from wood shavings to a hair from his employee’s beard! It wasn’t until after a year of mistakes that carbonized bamboo emerged as the best source.

And Yo-Yo Ma was driven not just to hit the perfect note, but to make people feel. As a result, he was driven to perfection and practiced harder than anyone else. His goal of creating music that resonated in a deep and emotional way gave him drive. When onstage, Yo-Yo Ma considers himself this way: “I’m the host of a wonderful party. You’re all my guests.” His higher goal changed the whole scene.

So how does this relate to you and me? First, if you have a poster hanging up in your room that says “Make Mistakes. Make Mistakes. Make Mistakes,” go ahead and tear it down. Or better yet, just cross out the word *Make* three times. Then replace those crossed-out words with “Accept, Embrace, Transform.” When we do that, it opens up the opportunity to learn, to connect with others, and to move ahead. Finally, follow master photographer Ansel Adams’s advice: “Strive for perfection. Settle for excellence.”

**A LIFE SPENT MAKING MISTAKES IS NOT ONLY MORE HONORABLE,
BUT MORE USEFUL THAN A LIFE SPENT DOING NOTHING.**

— GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

EXERCISE

STEP 1

“Mistakes aren't the problem, it's what we do with them that counts,” as Evan Chong once said.

In an effort to handle mistakes with more ease, let's follow Yo-Yo Ma's lead. When Ma plays a concert, he has a vision for a higher goal. His goal is to connect and to make people feel.

In your own life, think about one area of your personal or professional life that can be compared to a stage. Think of something that you do when you have to deliver and you have to perform.

Next, write down the task and then try to think up a higher goal. Come up with a few goals and select the one that fits. In moments of emergency (that is, when you make a mistake), think back to this goal so that you can handle that mistake with more grace and ease.

STEP 2

Come up with three people you respect who handle mistakes with exemplary ease. Write down their names followed by a few words that reveal what they do well. Use these ideas as inspiration for your own growth.

1.

2.

3.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GRIT AND GLORY

The creative fight is less *Monday Night Football* and more climbing up the sheer face of a rock. Playing in the NFL requires bulk, might, and strength. It's hyped up, and it's loud. Rock climbing is discreet. Climbers use ingenuity, agility, and guts to accomplish their goals. Last year's Super Bowl was watched by 111.5 million fans. Most great rock climbs are witnessed by only a few, just like creative pursuits, which

often take place in isolation rather than in front of adoring fans. And football is a fight against another team, but rock climbing is a fight within. The climber must dig deep into his reservoirs of tenacity, technical skill, and creativity to overcome the odds. Football is played to win. Mountain climbers ascend tall peaks "for the spirit of adventure to keep alive the soul of man," as George Mallory said.

AN UPHILL CLIMB At its most basic level, I think we create with a similar drive in mind. At least for me, I create for the sheer joy of making something myself. As with the climber who looks down the face of the cliff he just climbed, there is great gratification to be had when you enjoy a mountaintop view that you have earned.

After nineteen days and 3000 feet of climbing, Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson stood on top of El Capitan peak in Yosemite with joy and tears in their eyes. These two guys had earned their victory. They had just finished a free-ascent climb that took seven years to plan and complete. After years of training and attempts, the impossible had been done—a new route was established as one of the most difficult climbs in the world. Midway up the climb, Kevin posted on Twitter, “This is not an effort to conquer. It’s about realizing a dream.”

Tommy and Kevin are the champions of their game. Yet if you were to walk by them on the street you wouldn’t know you had just passed two of the greatest climbers of all time. It’s not uncommon for climbers to be slight in build yet immensely strong. Their strength is often hidden under a layer of fleece and a waterproof shell. The only way you might have recognized Tommy Caldwell is if you noticed that the top half of his index finger is gone.

Tommy lost his finger to a table saw accident more than ten years ago. The doctors were able to reattach the severed finger but told him he’d never climb again. After some trial and error, Tommy had it removed because it held him back. A few months after it was removed, Tommy free-climbed Salathe Wall, another route on El Capitan, in less than 24 hours. He has since climbed some of the most difficult mountains with only four fingers on one hand. Tommy is as tough as they get—not that he’d ever say that about himself. You’d never catch him flexing his muscles for someone to admire. He is humble, mindful, and aware. And so is the creative fight. It doesn’t gloat and it doesn’t crush. Yet creativity isn’t some pushover that’s afraid of a difficult task.

Like rock climbing, creativity is a subtle sport that’s easy to miss. Just like the first image in this chapter—look closer and you’ll see two climbers you might have overlooked.

COURAGE, RESOLVE, AND STRENGTH Tommy is a role model of the creative fight because of who he is and how he approaches his craft. Most climbers excel in one type of climbing. Tommy is world-class in multiple ways: bouldering, sport climbing, and mountaineering—all demand different skills. As Andrew Bisharat wrote in a *National Geographic* article, “To understand the breadth of Caldwell’s athleticism, picture an Olympic runner who is as talented in the marathon as he is in the hundred-meter dash.”

Those who join the creative fight know that creativity feeds off hardship just like climbers who are constantly in search of more difficult routes. Difficulty clarifies the creative fight. Tommy put it this way: “Through hardship in my own life, I learned that it is what changes us the most. It puts us in an intensely meditative state where we figure out what we really want.” Tommy has been through a lot, including being kidnapped at gunpoint and held hostage by rebels in Kyrgyzstan over a decade ago, but the hardship is what gives him his edge. In his own words, “It motivates me to go for things that I have always dreamed of.” Guys like Tommy embody the ideal that the more difficult the challenge the better the reward.

THE GREATNESS OF GRIT One characteristic that makes someone good at big-wall climbing is grit. Grit can be defined different ways. It can be thought of as tiny particles of crushed rock. The oyster reminds us that without grit, there is no pearl. Grit is a characteristic that is a mixture of courage, resolve, and strength. Like small granite rocks, grit is strength that won’t give up. Those who are gritty have a passion to pursue a goal over an extended amount of time. No one is born with grit. It’s grown into us through the difficulties of life. Look up the word grit in a thesaurus, and it says it all: “Courage, bravery, pluck, mettle, backbone, spirit, strength of character, strength of will, moral fiber, steel, nerve, fortitude, toughness, hardiness, resolve, resolution, determination, tenacity, perseverance, and endurance.”

The grittiest rock climber I ever met is a man named Mark Wellman. I was 18 when I asked him for his autograph and





shook his hand. I had recently hiked the well-established trail to the top of Half Dome in Yosemite. At the top there is a rock called the diving board. I inched myself to the edge and peered almost 5000 feet to the valley below. As I shook Mark's hand I was in awe of the strength of his grasp. He had recently climbed up the face of Half Dome without the use of his legs. After 13 days and over 7000 pull-ups, Mark became the first paraplegic to make the climb.

We tend to think our own problems are large. But that's just because we're comparing them to things that are too small. Like me writing this book: "Oh, writing is so hard," I complain. If Mark Wellman can pull himself up Half Dome, I can sit down with my shiny laptop in a comfortable coffee shop and hack out a few words. The obstacle is never a valid excuse. Rock climbers look for obstacles, and that's what lights their fire.

When I looked into Mark's eyes, I saw a kind of strength that I hadn't seen before. When I saw Mark's determination and shook his hand, it changed my life. It was like a transfer of energy had taken place. I had no idea that Mark's resilience would help me develop my own.

TWO SHOES When we are exposed to greatness, it has the potential to awaken our own. I think that's why pilgrims in the Middle Ages collected relics and religious artifacts. They were in search of something that would inspire their own faith, hope, and strength. While I can't relate to wanting a saint's tooth, I do understand their search. Just like what I was searching for when I asked my friend Chris for his shoes. Chris is a world-class triathlete and Ironman champion and is of my closest friends. He trains like a mad man and goes through shoes faster than I finish a pack of gum. One day we were hanging out in his garage and he was cleaning up. Chris was about to throw away a stinky old pair of shoes when I asked if I could have them to hang on my wall. He looked at me like I was a crazy, but he obliged and even signed the soles. Every time I see those shoes I'm reminded of his tenacity and grit.

When he was younger, Chris wasn't much of an athlete but got inspired to do a triathlon after seeing the event on television. After a number of years of insanely difficult work, Chris became a pro—it was a dream come true. Just as his career was starting to take off, his dreams were shattered when some doofus ran over his foot. That culprit was not a stranger but a close personal friend. It was me.

ACCIDENTS AND HOPE That accident was something I will always regret. Chris and I were meeting for breakfast with some friends. He arrived first, when I pulled up in my car and waited for a parking spot to open up. Chris walked up to the car and we began to chat. We kept talking as I started to back up to park. Suddenly, Chris tripped and then fell from my view. He yelled for me to drive forward. I pulled forward and felt the car roll off his foot. He lay on the ground in immense pain. Jumping out, I came to his side. He winced in pain, grabbed my hand, and said, “Bro, it’s not your fault. I’ll be OK.” The X-ray revealed 50 fractures, and the doctor told him he would never run and would have problems when he walked.

Chris fought his way back and went on to set course records and become one of the best in the world. He picked up amazing sponsors, spoke at charity events, and encouraged others to accomplish their dreams. Chris was often featured on the cover of magazines. My favorite cover was the one that his sponsors asked me to shoot.

It’s difficult to describe how horrible it feels to injure one of your closest friends. Not to mention that I thought I had ruined his career. The accident was clearly my fault, but there was nothing that could be done. Chris never held a grudge and never gave up. He even used his position to give a boost to my photography career. Chris embodies the creative fight ideals.

When I feel defeated or overwhelmed, I look at Chris’s shoe and it restores my hope and drive. That shoe helps me to stop slouching and stand up straight. So does that picture of Mark Wellman and the thought of Tommy Caldwell making his climb. If we allow them to, people who do great things can become like mentors who teach us resolve.

GRIT LESSONS Grit isn’t easy to learn—there aren’t any grit classes offered in schools. So I asked one friend who climbs El Capitan if grit can be taught. He said, “The only way to learn grit is to get out there and get your ass kicked. You have to suffer and you have to fail.” Grit isn’t something that you’ll find in an online course. It’s gained while in pursuit of something big. Grit requires belief that it can be done. That’s why having someone to look up to can help. It also helps to be reminded that grit is in the secret sauce for success.

EXERCISE

Grit isn't gained without a challenge; and courage, backbone, and tenacity are born in difficult times. Such adversity scares most people away. Don't let that be you. Surround yourself with stories, images, and artifacts that will inspire you to dig deep and embolden you to press on. Use this exercise to find what will help.

STEP 1. PEOPLE

Write down five people you admire and a few words or a quote that describes why. Consider historical people, colleagues, or friends. Don't worry about getting your list right. This isn't an exhaustive list or a "top 5." Think of it like sketching out a few ideas. Keep this exercise simple and trust your gut. Here are a few examples to get you thinking about your own:

- Nelson Mandela. Courage, kindness, and resolve. Imprisoned for 27 years without giving up.
- Jeff Orwig (my Dad). Work ethic, deep faith, tough as nails.
- Mother Teresa. Responded to human suffering with warmth, humility, and love.
- Chris Lieto. Overcame obstacles and inspires others to do the same.
- Frederick Douglass. Escaped the shackles of slavery and went on to thrive.
- Theodore Roosevelt. Legendary vigor and grit.

PERSON YOU ADMIRE AND WHY

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____
- 5. _____

STEP 2. ARTIFACTS, OBJECTS, THINGS

Select a couple of the names on your list and consider what objects you could display that would trigger and remind you of that person's grit. This could be a biography you display on a shelf or a quote that you print out. Consider these artifacts as more than decoration or fluff. In your mind, treat them like totems or icons that represent a deeper reality. Print out a photograph of Nelson Mandela and let his countenance fortify your resolve to fight the good fight.

INDEX

A

about this book, vi–vii
 accidents, 134, 240
 Adams, Ansel, 72, 91, 120, 193
 adaptation, 82–83
 adversity, 135
 advice, 214, 215
 age
 creativity and, 22, 208
 time perception and, 145
Alchemist, The (Coelho), 87, 88, 93
 amygdala, 76, 81, 82
 Arbus, Diane, 124
 Aristotle, 176, 179
 Armani, Giorgio, 112
 Armstrong, Lance, 59, 61
 art, 29, 176, 220, 266, 276
 authenticity, 24, 66, 120
 author's contact info, 277
 autonomy, 78

B

Barrie, James M., 215
 Beatles, The, 106
 “Before I die....” question, 229
 Berkus, David, 166–167
 Bernstein, Leonard, 229
 Berry, Wendell, 6, 172
 Bisharat, Andrew, 130
 Blake, William, 202
 boomerang effect, 76
 Bourgeois, Louise, 22
 brain, lizard, 76
 breaks, taking, 164, 166–167, 183
 Brown, Brené, 48
 Brown, Stuart, 206, 208
 Brownie camera, 205–206
 Buber, Martin, 1
 Buddhism, 183, 194

C

Caen, Herb, 115
 Cain, Susan, 93
 Caldwell, Tommy, 130, 134
 Callahan, Steve, 152, 154
 cameras
 author's discovery of, 146, 149
 invention of GoPro, 200, 202
 success of simple, 205–206
 See also photography
 Camus, Albert, 276
carpe diem, 230, 231
 Carrey, Jim, 91
 Carter, Keith, 188
Cat in the Hat, The (Dr. Seuss), 263
 Celtic mythology, 156
 Cerf, Bennett, 264
 Cervantes, Miguel de, 6, 7
 Chang, Candy, 226, 229
 children, 19–20, 208
 Chong, Evan, 73
 Chouinard, Yvon, 14, 214
 Cleese, John, 183
 Close, Chuck, 83, 151
 Coelho, Paulo, 48, 87, 88, 93
 Cohen, Leonard, 223
 collaboration, 237
 Collins, Jim, 127
 combinatory play, 39, 42
 connecting the dots, 40, 42
 constraints, 263–264, 266
 Cotte, Pascal, 220
 Cox, Coleman, 151
 craft, 191, 193
 creative adaptation, 83
 creative flow, 78, 149, 261
 creative growth, 45, 72, 186, 189, 206

creativity
 practicing, 25, 179, 206, 261
 steps in process of, 27–30
Creativity (Csikszentmihalyi), 40
 critique, 45–51
 boomerang effect and, 76
 confronting fear and, 76, 78
 ways of dealing with, 48–51
 Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, 40, 93, 149
 cummings, e e, 173
 curiosity, 193
 Currey, Donald Rusk, 65

D

da Vinci, Leonardo, 220
 Dahl, Roald, 22, 25, 186
 day jobs, 10
 de Botton, Alain, 183
Dead Poets Society (Schulman), 112, 230
 death
 awareness of, 226, 229–230, 245
 close encounters with, 240, 243
 facing the fact of, 225, 247, 252
 life illuminated by, 248
 Decker, Ben, 49
Deep Survival (Gonzales), 81
 Degas, Edgar, 261
 devil's advocate, 45–46
 Dickens, Charles, 180, 250
 Dickinson, Emily, 243
 difficulty, 130, 215, 266, 272, 276
 digital photography, 119–120, 267
 See also photography
 digital sabbath, 183
 discontent, 214, 215
 distractions, 179, 180, 183

Don Quixote (Cervantes), 6
 Douglass, Frederick, 135, 141
 Dr. Seuss, 141, 142, 263–264
 duChemin, David, 120

E

Eastman, George, 205
 Edison, Thomas, 42, 72, 214
 education, 20, 22, 211, 213
 effort, creative, 4, 7, 22, 151–152
 Einstein, Albert, 29, 39, 55, 56, 162, 164, 206, 220
 Eliot, T. S., 170, 179, 267
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 63, 88, 170, 208, 247
 energy map, 157
 enthusiasm, 88, 90
 Escher, M. C., 138
Essentialism (McKowen), 93
 excuses, 101

F

factory visits, 33–34
 fear, 22, 70, 76, 226, 237
Finding Your Element (Robinson), 93
 flaws, 76, 78, 223
 flow, 78, 149, 261
Flow (Csikszentmihalyi), 93
 football, 129
 Ford, Harrison, 90
 Forster, E. M., 62
 Frank, Anne, 22
 Frankl, Viktor, 93, 214
 Franklin, Ben, 22, 55, 252

G

Gehry, Frank, 48
 Geisel, Ted, 141, 142

Glass, Ira, 257
goals, higher, 72, 73, 127
Godin, Seth, 76, 176
Golden Gate Bridge, 115
Gonzales, Laurence, 81
good vs. great, 123–127
GoPro camera, 200, 202
grace, 62
Graham, Martha, 24
gratitude, 270, 272, 275
greatness, 123, 124, 127, 133
Greek mythology, 156, 157
Green Eggs and Ham (Dr. Seuss), 264
grit, 130, 134, 135
guidelines, 267
Gupta, Robert, 272, 275
Gutenberg, Johannes, 35

H

habitats, 185–189
habits, 179
hardship, 130
Harris, Edmund, 98
helplessness, learned, 22
Hemingway, Ernest, 78, 186
Henri, Robert, 154
Henson, Jim, 34
holistic view, 108
hope, 4, 134, 141, 233
Hugo, Victor, 186, 272
humanity, 197

I

ideals, 152
identity, 78
ignited ideas, 236–237
imagination, 27, 29, 30, 193–194
imitation, 213

information, 27, 29, 30, 40
innovation, 29, 30, 42, 260
inspiration, 57, 90, 97, 151, 152, 156
inventions, 22, 35, 40, 42, 200, 202
iteration, 261

J

Jacks, L. P., 188
Jackson, Mahalia, 233–234, 236
Jefferson, Thomas, 92
Jobs, Steve, 40, 42, 55, 56, 226
Johnson, Jack, 121
Johnson, Steven, 42
Jorgeson, Kevin, 130

K

Keats, John, 194, 252
Keller, Helen, 6
Kermit the Frog, 34
Kerouac, Jack, vi
kindness, 149
King, Martin Luther, Jr., 22, 225, 234, 236, 237
Kleon, Austin, 214
Konnikova, Maria, 208

L

Labor, Earl, 48
ladders, 10, 13–14, 127, 156
Lamott, Anne, 49
Laskas, Jeanne Marie, 173
learned helplessness, 22
Lee, Bruce, 260, 261
Lennon, John, 29, 108, 189
Les Misérables (Hugo), 188, 272
letting go, 156, 166
Lewis, C. S., 261

Liebeck, Jack, 164
Lief, Judy, 179
Lieto, Chris, 135
light bulbs, 42
limitations, 263, 264, 266, 267
Lincoln, Abraham, 50, 57
lizard brain, 76
London, Jack, 7, 48, 97–98, 194
Lucas, George, 90
luck, 87, 88, 90, 91–92

M

Ma, Yo-Yo, 24, 69–70, 72, 73
magnetic north, 61
Mahabharata, 245
Mallory, George, 129
Mandela, Nelson, 135
Man's Search for Meaning (Frankl), 93
Marcus Aurelius, 53
Matisse, Henri, 206
McCullough, David, 16
McGregor, Ewan, 206
McKowen, Greg, 93
meditation, 183
Melville, Herman, 213, 250
Merton, Thomas, 13, 93
Merwin, W. S., 243
“Messenger” (Oliver), 112
Michelangelo, 276
might, acting with, 250
Miller, Henry, 197
Milton, John, 275
mind wandering, 166, 167
mindfulness, 119, 183
mistakes, 61–62, 70, 72, 73
Moby Dick (Melville), 213
momentum, 120, 149, 237
Mona Lisa (da Vinci), 220

monomania, 257
Mother Teresa, 135, 172, 217
mountain climbing, 129–130, 133
Muir, John, 9–10, 11, 172
multi-tasking, 180
Mumford, Marcus, 193
muses, 154, 156, 157
music, 164, 166, 220, 272
mystery, 193, 220
myths, 156, 157

N

names, 141, 143
National Geographic, 130
National Parks, 10
nature, 10, 156, 172
near-death experiences, 240
negative vows, 66, 67
Nin, Anais, 91
nom de guerre, 141, 143
Nye, Naomi Shihab, 226

O

oasis, 188
Of Mice and Men (Steinbeck), 258
Olds, Sharon, 43, 208
Oliver, Mary, 112, 252
optimism, 161, 162
originality, 203, 213
Orwig, Jeff, 135

P

pain, 146, 240, 243, 252
panic, 81, 82
paradigms, 48, 51
parenting, 82, 83
Parkinson, Cyril, 229
passion, 55, 62, 63, 202, 203
path to success, 106, 109, 138, 142

patience, 149
 Penn, William, 172
 perfectionism, 70, 72, 161
 personal legend, 87, 88, 90, 93
 perspective change, 149
Peter Pan (Barrie), 215
 photography
 authenticity and, 120
 author's discovery of, 146, 149
 dealing with critiques of, 49, 76
 digital, 119–120, 267
 good vs. great, 123–127
 reason for doing, 115
 silence related to, 170
 slowing down in, 119–120, 121
 vision and, 91
 Picard, Max, 169
 Picasso, Pablo, 24, 55, 56, 152, 172, 206
 Plato, 16
 play, 206, 208, 209
 Plutarch, vi
 Poe, Edgar Allan, 193
 poetry, 112, 260
 practice, 25, 179, 206, 261
 Pressfield, Steve, 237
 printing press, 35
 Prinz, Joachim, 234

Q

Quiet (Cain), 93

R

Rath, Tom, 93
 redwood trees, 185–186

regret vs. shame, 62
 resistance, 237
 resources, vii, 231, 277
 Riboud, Marc, 146
 Rilke, Rainer Maria, 230
 risks, creative, 66, 67
 Robinson, Ken, 20, 22, 90, 93
 rock climbing, 129–130, 133
 Roethke, Thomas, 167
 role models, 109
 Rollins, Henry, 95, 97, 162
 Roosevelt, Theodore, vii, 10, 13, 98, 100, 101, 135
 rules, 56, 264, 266

S

Schnabel, Artur, 176
 school system, 20, 22
 Schooler, Jonathan, 166, 167
 Schulman, Tom, 112
 Schwab, Charles, 49
 self-forgetfulness, 149
 Seligman, Martin, 22
Seven Story Mountain, The (Merton), 93
 Sexton, John, 172
 shame vs. regret, 62
 Shaw, George Bernard, 72, 208
 Shelton, Jeff, 111, 186, 215
 shortcuts, 191, 193
 silence, 169–170, 172, 173
 Silverstein, Shel, 30
 Sinek, Simon, 112
 Slater, Kelly, 78
 Sledge, Sharlande, 156

slowing down, 119–120, 121
 Socrates, 159
 solitude, 172–173
 spray and pray, 119
 status quo, 112, 176, 188
Steal Like an Artist (Kleon), 214
 Steinbeck, John, 257–258, 260, 261
 Stone, Linda, 175
 Stravinsky, Igor, 266
Strength Finder (Rath), 93
 strengths, identifying, 79
 stuckness, 146, 149
 success
 definitions of, 14, 16, 141
 misconceptions about, 141
 path to, 106, 109, 138, 142
 tenacity related to, 76, 97
 suffering, 215
 survival, 81, 82–83
 switch-tasking, 180

T

talent, 97
 technique, 260, 261
 TED talks, 20, 48, 90, 112, 229
 tenacity, 97, 101
 thin places, 156, 157
 Thomas, Dylan, 252
 Thoreau, Henry David, 103
 Thurman, Howard, 88
 time, 145–146, 250
 “To Build a Fire” (London), 194
 Tolkien, J. R. R., 260
 Tolstoy, Leo, 119

Tortilla Flat (Steinbeck), 257
 tragedy, 59, 83, 272
 Twain, Mark, 59, 61, 62, 119, 141

U

uniqueness, 24, 78

V

values, 62, 63
 Van Gogh, Vincent, 276
 Velázquez, Diego, 194, 197
Velveteen Rabbit, The (Williams), 220
 vision, 91
 vows, 66, 67

W

waking up, 240
War of Art, The (Pressfield), 237
 Watts, Alan W., 202
 web resources, vii, 231, 277
 Wellman, Mark, 130, 133, 134
 why vs. what, 111–115
 wild edges, 220, 223
 Williams, Margery, 220
 Wiseman, Richard, 90, 91–92
 Wolpe, David, 230
 work-life balance, 108
 workspaces, 186, 188
 Wright, Frank Lloyd, 22, 138

Y

Yeats, W. B., 75
 Yelverton, Theresa, 10
 Yosemite National Park, 9–10, 130, 133