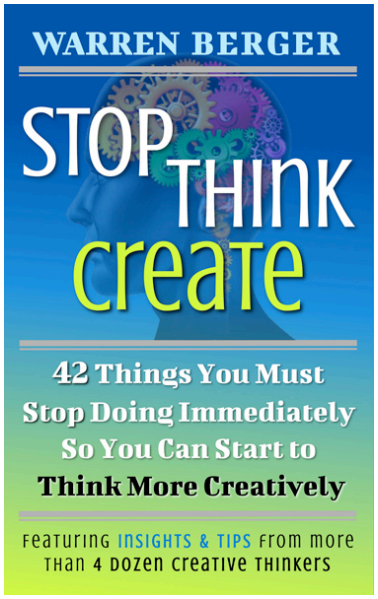

STOP • THINK • CREATE

42 Things You Must Stop Doing Immediately So You Can Start to Think More Creatively

by Warren Berger

Featuring insights from:

Teresa Amabile • Yves Behar • Scott Belsky • John Bielenberg
Michael Bierut • Dorothea Brande • John Seely Brown • Tim Brown
John Cage • George Carlin • John Cleese • Lee Clow
Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi • ee cummings • Edward DeBono
Peter Diamandis • Charles Duhigg • Ralph Waldo Emerson
Jane Fulton-Suri • Milton Glaser • Seth Godin • Joi Ito • Steve Jobs
Tibor Kalman • Dean Kamen • Guy Kawasaki • George Lois • Eric Maisel
Roger Martin • Bruce Mau • Matthew E. May • Michael Michalko
Jennifer Morland • Maria Popova • Daniel Pink • Karim Rashid • Eric Ries
Sir Ken Robinson • Diego Rodriguez • Stefan Sagmeister • Paula Scher
Jacqueline Lloyd Smith • John Thackara • George Bernard Shaw
Bob Sutton • Dan Wieden • Luke Williams • Frank Lloyd Wright
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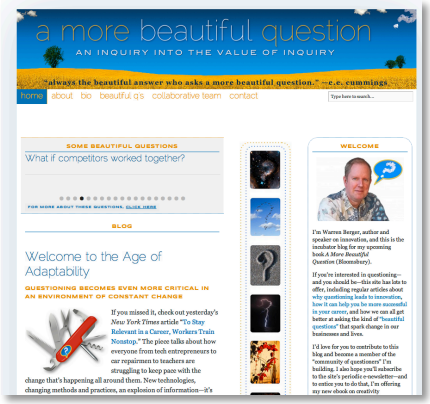

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Get #freebook with 42 tips for overcoming #creativity blocks, by @GlimmerGuy http://bit.ly/StopThinkCreate

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Thanks for passing along the good word on my work.

INTRODUCTION

Is there a magic formula that can enable one to become more creative?

I wish it were so; I could use some of that formula myself, and so could just about every writer, artist, innovator, and designer I know. The reality seems to be that creativity flows through us unexpectedly, unpredictably, often too briefly, and sometimes not at all. It doesn't necessarily come when beckoned.

But it's also true that creative people can be very adept at blocking it, avoiding it, or telling it to please come back later. Many of us sabotage our own creativity on a regular basis. Why would we do such a thing? We may be afraid to dive into creative challenges because we're worried that we're not up to the task. We may be waiting for some bolt from the blue. We may convince ourselves the timing's not quite right, that we need to do other things first—to prepare, to clear the schedule, to arrange the bookshelves. These are usually just procrastination tactics. They're the roadblocks we carefully place in front of ourselves so that we'll have excuses for not moving forward.

This book is mostly about removing those roadblocks; about getting rid of the bad habits and faulty assumptions that can stand in the way of creativity. It's also about figuring out how to take those first tentative steps when starting a new creative venture. It's about finding ways to spark ideas. Or figuring out how to get your arms around a creative challenge, so that you can tackle it. Mostly it's about giving yourself the freedom, permission, space, and time to think.

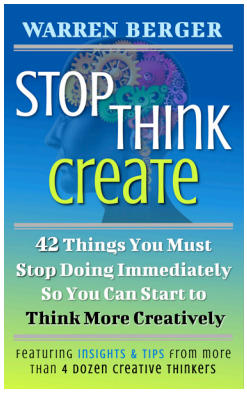
I have been writing about creativity for more than 20 years. Much of that **research has been distilled down to 42 tips with accompanying short explanations and wise quotes.** The sources of this knowledge are well-known creative people that I have either interviewed or studied from afar. Whenever I come upon a great little twig of creative advice, I tend to swoop in and pick it up, then add it to the other twigs I've gathered. The way I see it, this is something we all should do. Hopefully you'll

find some of the twigs here useful, and you'll pick them up and add them to your own little creative nest.

I want to thank the people quoted in the pages that follow (many of whom have no idea they're being quoted here and I hope they're okay with that; if not I'm sure they'll let me know). You will find a few of the creative experts referenced repeatedly; this probably just means these were people I had more contact with (the designer Bruce Mau, for instance, is quoted several times, because I interviewed him extensively for my 2009 book *Glimmer*.) If the quote or idea that I mention did not come from an interview and if it appeared first in another source, you'll find that source cited in the Endnotes section at the end of the book.

This book is a creative experiment for me. My nonfiction is usually published through mainstream publishing houses; Penguin Press did my last book, Bloomsbury will do my next book, *A More Beautiful Question* (a project which I'll talk more about at the end of this book). I'm self-publishing this e-book so that I could offer it free to readers who have done me the favor of subscribing to my blog http://AMoreBeautifulQuestion.com. I hope you enjoy it and that if you do, you'll support my work in various ways: buying my other books, or just coming to my Beautiful Question website to share ideas, thoughts, and questions.

—Warren Berger



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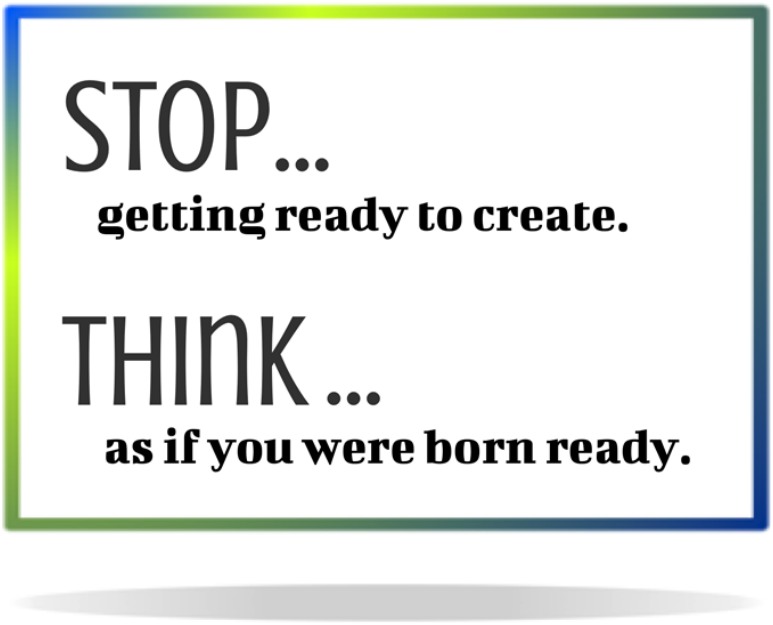
1.



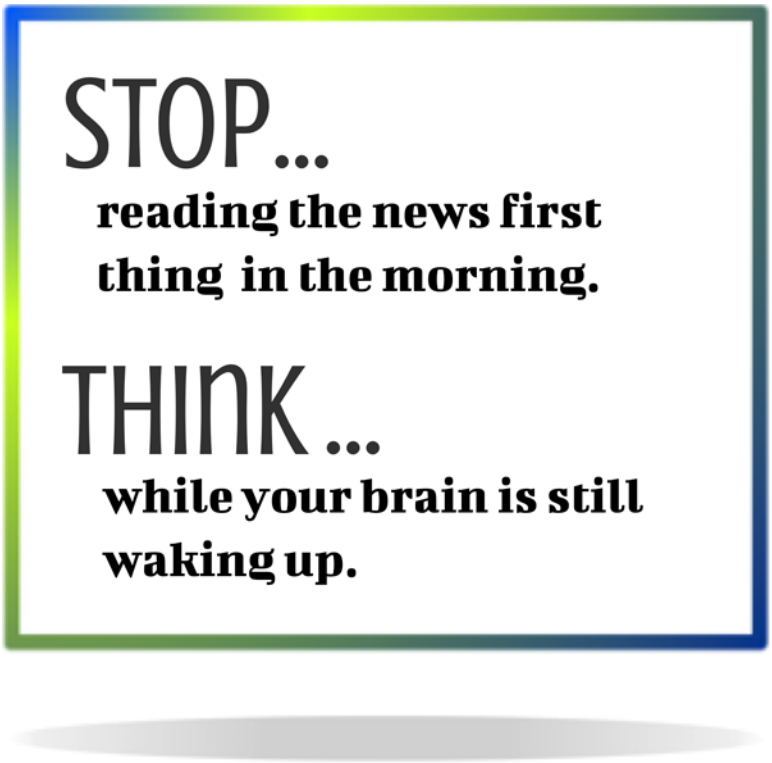
This first tip is about "starting"—which seems like a good place to start. When I was working on my book *Glimmer*, the designer who was the main subject of that book, **Bruce Mau**, shared a story about a writer friend of his who was about to embark on an ambitious new book. The writer "was always preparing to get started," Mau said, "always arranging his bookshelves and organizing his office" so that everything would be exactly where he needed it as he began working on the book. Only trouble: He never did get started.

That urge to "rearrange the bookshelves"—or to engage in various other forms of prolonged preparation (taking crash courses, reading all the books you can find on the subject at hand, amassing your files) in advance of doing the actual work—is natural for anyone about to undertake a difficult creative challenge. Yes, of course, we want to be prepared. But often, what we really want to do is delay the scary inevitability of facing the blank page, the empty canvas, or the white computer screen.

So here's a novel idea: Do some actual work on your project—even if you must do it blind and ignorant—as soon as possible. Take some kind of first step. There are many preliminary ways to start to make an idea real and tangible: an outline, sketch, anything. Just get something down on paper and consider it a starting point.

Then you can take a break to arrange those bookshelves or file folders. It'll be easier to go back to the work if you have something to go back to.

2.



Maybe you don't read the paper in the morning—maybe you get your news online. Or watch "Morning Joe." The point is, if you're not using your early waking hours to do creative thinking, you may be wasting one of the most fertile times of the day.

As some of the latest neurological research shows, amazing things are going on in the sub-conscious of your brain—mental connections are being made, ideas are constantly forming and re-forming. Your unconscious brain comes alive when you're sleeping and dreaming. So what better time to tap into its creative power than when you're just waking up?

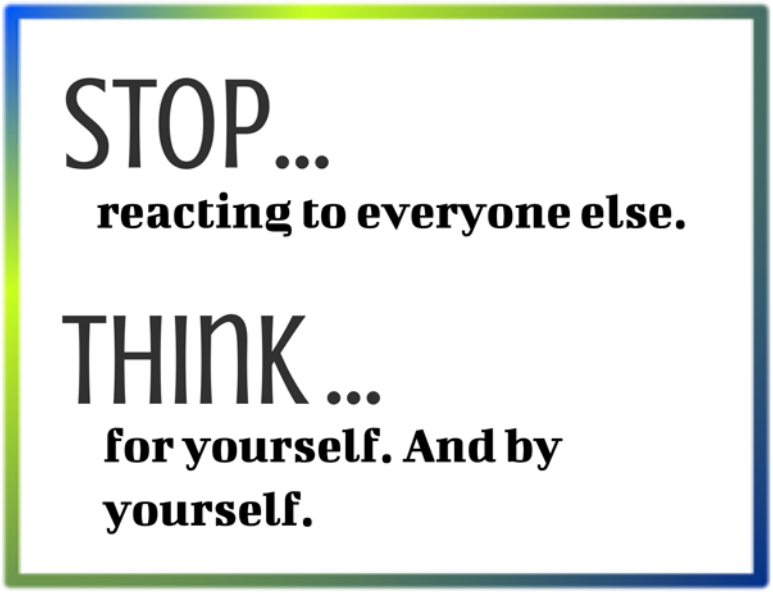
As the revered creative writing teacher and author **Dorothea Brande** put it, "To have the full benefit of the richness of the unconscious you must learn to write easily and smoothly when the unconscious is in the ascendant." Brande's advice: In the mornings, get up a half hour earlier than usual and—"without talking, without reading the morning's

paper"—begin to write. This advice can be extended beyond writing to any creative endeavor: Get up, go someplace quiet, start thinking and capturing ideas. Try to take advantage of what Brande calls the wonderful "twilight zone between sleep and the full waking state."

Of course, it may be that you are simply not a morning person; maybe your creative juices flow best late at night or in the afternoons. The author **Daniel Pink** recommends you figure out your peak times by giving yourself a "flow test" (an idea first devised by the psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi) to see which times of day you tend to become most immersed in creative thinking and work. Once you know what your prime creative time is, Pink suggests, you should try to restructure your day to take advantage of these "flow times."

Don't miss those opportune moments to tap into your creativity. The news can wait.

3.



You may find lots of interesting things in your email inbox, but you probably won't find a big idea there. On the contrary, all those emails, tweets, phone messages, and other stimuli that bombard us throughout the day tend to keep us from focusing and thinking. And — here's the harsh truth—we kind of like it that way. We want to be distracted. Why? "It is easier to react than to create," explains the designer **Stefan Sagmeister**. And so, as he pointed out to me, when people complain about being so busy with emails, tweets, and meetings, "within that complaint is an excuse." Most of us would much rather answer another email than face the blank page.

This is why it becomes imperative to unplug and withdraw at times. The comedian and creativity expert **John Cleese** says we need to retreat to what he calls "the tortoise enclosure" — a quiet, cut-off environment, where you can dream, think, and create without interruption or distraction.

Cleese advises going into that shell for designated periods of time. And don't come out (and don't let anyone in) till the time's up. You may be tempted to leave the shell early, particularly if you're having trouble thinking/creating. You'll want to take a break, check your email. Just know that if you give in to that temptation—if you leave the shell prematurely—you may be killing an idea before it is born.

4.

The world of creativity is rife with contradictions and at this point I'll offer up an insight that may seem to contradict the preceding recommendation about going into your tortoise shell and not coming out. That kind of forced retreat often works wonders. Except when it doesn't.

There are times when you may need to leave the shell—and get away from your desk—if only for a little while. And people who study creative thinking tell us there's a good reason for this. You can't necessarily force yourself to think of an idea. And sometimes the harder you try, the less likely you are to succeed. Picture someone sitting hunched over at his or her desk, face buried in hands, muttering, "Think, damn it, think!" Maybe you've been that person on occasion. And if so, what you've probably learned is that the answer rarely comes to you in that forced, desperate moment. If it comes at all, it's more likely to arrive later on, when you weren't looking so intently for it.

There are good reasons for why we get ideas in the shower or on a relaxing walk instead of when we're wracking our brains trying to think. In searching for ideas, your mind needs free reign and lots of room to roam. **Dr. Scott Barry Kaufman**, an expert on creative thinking, reports: "There are studies that show that if you let your mind wander and think about other things, you have a higher chance of coming up with an insight than if you're exerting all your effort and energy on the task."

So when you're stuck, get up and take a walk. Take a shower. Or wash the dishes—research shows that mindless tasks are great because they allow you to think without being conscious that you're thinking. But don't use these breaks as a way to avoid your creative challenges. Use them as a way to temporarily clear your head and come at those challenges from a fresh perspective.

5.

This is a variation on the idea that you may want to leave your desk from time to time. It's a suggestion that, if and when you do so, you may want to go somewhere inspiring. The author **Edward Glassman**, who writes about innovation, recommends going to "stimulating environments during the idea incubation process."

Which raises the question: What constitutes a stimulating environment? The answer probably depends on the individual, but keep in mind there is a fine line between "stimulate" and "distract." Going to a movie, for example, is more likely to distract you from your own creative thoughts as you give yourself over to someone else's. A stimulating environment is one that exposes you to ideas and inspiration yet still leaves room for you to think about your own ideas. And—best case scenario—it may result in you connecting someone else's ideas to your own.

There are a number places that can provide this kind of stimulation, but for a foolproof option, listen to the legendary designer and ad man **George Lois**, who advises**:** "Go to the museum. If you want to do something sharp and innovative, you have to know what went on before. Museums are custodians of epiphanies."

6.

If you think about it, we develop lots of habits that keep us from thinking. Thinking is hard, lonely work; many of us prefer activity that's easy and social. So we get into the habit of constantly checking emails, watching too much TV, chatting on the phone, surfing the web — you name it. Lots of these activities provide little rewards that serve to reinforce the habit: the small dopamine jolt you get from seeing a new email from a friend, the feel-good laugh you get from coming upon a funny YouTube video.

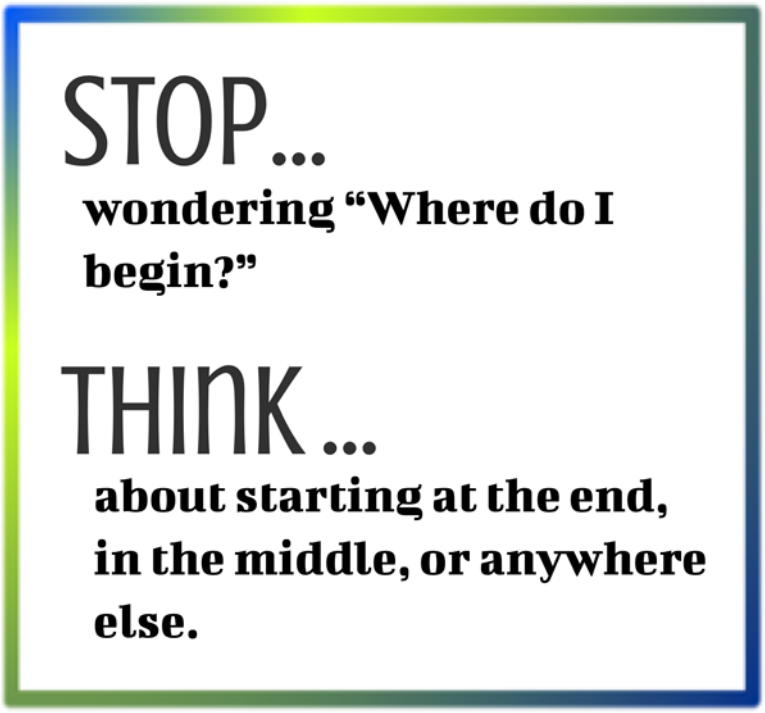
In his excellent book "The Power of Habit," the author **Charles Duhigg** breaks down the science of habit formation and shows that there is a loop at the core of every habit consisting of three parts: Cue, routine, reward.

Duhigg explains that if you identify the cues that trigger certain routines, you can begin to change all of this by experimenting with rewards. So if

you find, for example, that you're in the habit of spending your mornings doing everything *but* thinking, identify what your non-thinking routines are; try to isolate the cues that trigger these routines; and then start experimenting with different rewards in order to change the behavior.

In short, reward yourself for thinking. Maybe you say to yourself, *I'm not going to allow myself to have my morning cup of coffee* (or, if your designated thinking time is later in the day, not going to have my evening cocktail) *until I've done some deep, uninterrupted thinking*. Or*, I won't allow myself to check my morning emails until I've done a couple of hours of creative thinking.* Thus the email, instead of being a distraction, becomes the reward.

7.

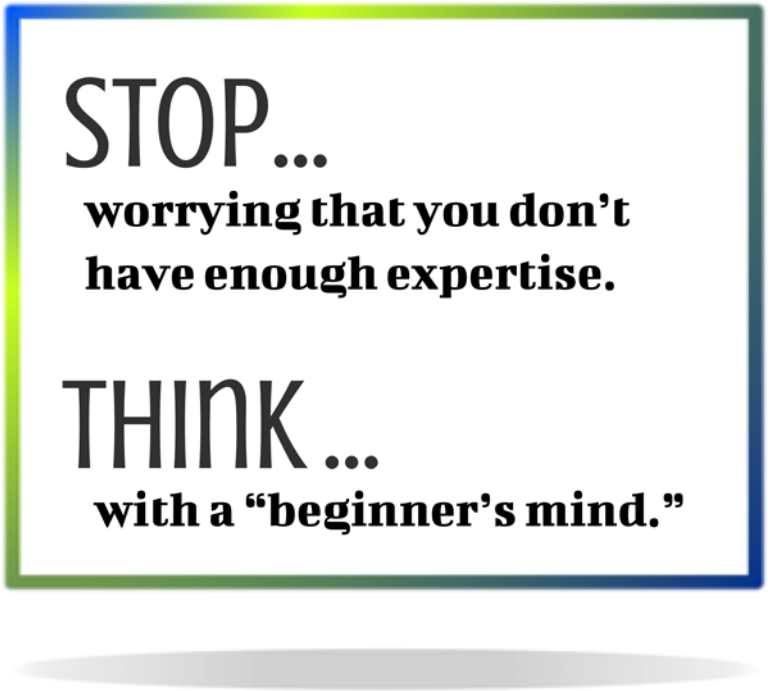


The designer **Bruce Mau** once told me that the most common lament he hears from young creative people is, "I don't know where to begin." And whenever he hears that, Mau shares a favorite quote from the maverick composer **John Cage**: "Begin anywhere."

It's great advice for anyone creating anything. Don't get hung up on finding the perfect starting point — the brilliant opening sentence, the stirring musical prologue. Begin with whatever you have right now; even if it's a partial idea, an incomplete or flawed prototype, or the middle of a story that has no beginning or end. (Great authors have been known to begin a book with a single phrase or quote that pops into their heads, emerging from somewhere in the middle of a story they haven't dreamed up yet).

The thing is to somehow capture that fragment of an idea that's floating in your head by writing it down, sketching it, creating an image of it — giving it form, somehow. Then build from there. It doesn't matter if that first piece is incomplete or half-baked. And whether it comes from the middle or the end, it is, nonetheless, a beginning.

8.



People often tend to feel they're not ready to tackle a creative challenge because they don't have sufficient knowledge or expertise yet. They haven't read enough, studied enough, prepared enough. They worry that when it comes to the subject at hand — whatever it may be — they're too stupid.

But stupid is where you begin. And it's actually a fine starting point for creative thinking.

Many great designers and innovators who are brought in as outsiders on projects end up benefiting from that outsider perspective. The designer **Paula Scher** once told me, "When I'm totally unqualified for a job, that's when I do my best work." It may sound odd, but Scher's point is that when she comes at a problem or creative challenge as a naïve outsider, she's able to look at it in a fresh way or (to refer to a Zen concept) with a "beginner's mind."

Steve Jobs was known for embracing the "beginner's mind" approach; it enabled him to ask the most fundamental questions about ideas or possibilities that were under consideration. It helped him to see opportunities and possibilities that so many other "experts" had failed to see.

Expertise is a valuable thing. But it doesn't necessarily go hand-in-hand with creative thinking; in fact, it can sometimes get in the way of creative thinking. As **Frank Lloyd Wright** once commented, "An expert is someone who has stopped thinking because he 'knows.' "

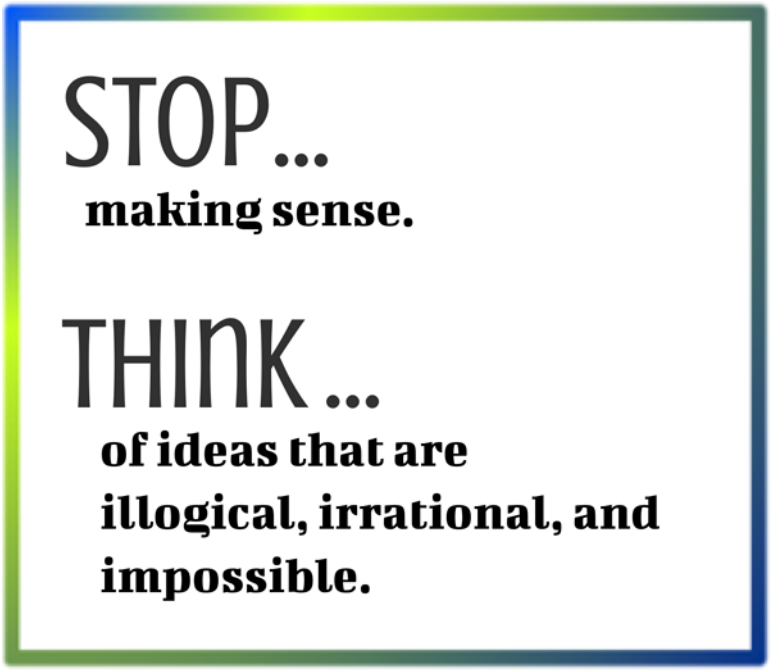
9.

This is another wonderful nugget that emerged from discussions with **Bruce Mau**, who has always urged creative people working for him to not worry about feeling as if they are "lost" on a project, particularly in the early stages. Feeling lost can be an opportunity — it can provide a brief window in which you're more open to new paths, slightly crazy ideas, and bold experimentation.

As Mau explains it, when you're feeling lost on a creative project — i.e., you're not sure how to proceed, or you think maybe you're in over your head — some very good things can happen. Because you don't know what to do, you're willing to try anything. You're not weighed down by conventional wisdom. Mau likens it to the phenomenon of actually being lost in the woods: When that happens, we tend to become more alert, more attuned to surroundings, more resourceful. Similarly, being "lost in the woods" on a creative endeavor may be unsettling, but it can be unsettling in a good way. There may be some wonderful ideas out there

in those woods — and you may have to get a little lost before you'll find them.

10.



To quote the innovator and X-Prize founder **Peter Diamandis**, "The day before something is a breakthrough, it's a crazy idea."

Ergo, if you're hoping to arrive at breakthroughs you must sometimes traffic in ideas that seem offbeat and unreasonable. Not that they'll all lead to breakthroughs — sometimes a crazy idea turns out to be just a crazy idea, and nothing more. But even then, it can have value in the creative process. The designer **Stefan Sagmeister** likes to entertain offbeat ideas to break the logjam created by too much predictable thinking. "Sometimes," Sagmeister says, "it can be useful to think of things from a perspective that makes no sense."

Illogical ideas can spark other ideas that may be just a little less crazy, and a little more possible. Crazy ideas can be a disruptive force, in a good way; as noted by **Luke Williams**, a former creative director at

Frog Design, such ideas form the basis of a "disruptive hypothesis" that can turn an industry upside down. Crazy ideas bring about change.

George Bernard Shaw was onto this a hundred years ago, when he remarked: "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man."

So stop making sense and you may start making progress.

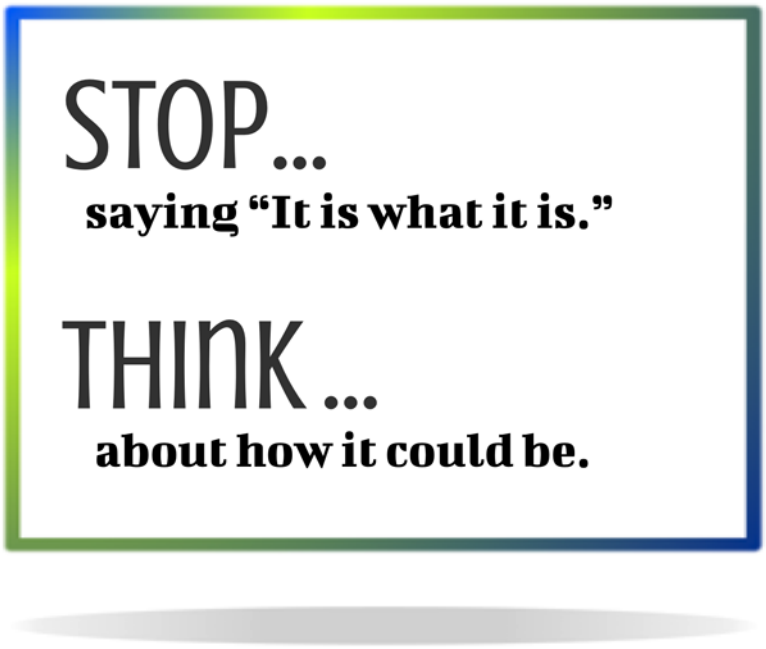
11.

It may sound a little strange, but some creative thinkers purposely try to think of "wrong" ideas. They do this as a way to break free of conventional thinking. Doing things the right way is what's expected; therefore doing things the wrong way can be more interesting and provocative. The legendary designer **Tibor Kalman** was known for purposely creating images that were upside down or otherwise skewed; it was one of his ways of breaking the mold.

"Wrong ideas" can also help guide you toward the right ones. The designer **John Bielenberg** teaches his creative employees and students to "think wrong" as a first step in the creative process. Likewise, the creative workshop leader **Tom Monahan** uses a similar approach called "180-degree thinking." The idea is to start out trying to conceive of something that would have the opposite effect of what you want to create — such as a car that is unable to move or an oven that can't cook. "You start out making something badly and then see if you can turn that

bad thing into something good," Monahan told me. This upside-down process forces your mind out of its usual patterns of problem-solving and creative thinking. And in so doing, it can spark ideas and insights that might never have surfaced otherwise. By starting wrong, you can end up with ideas that are more interesting — and therefore more right.

12.



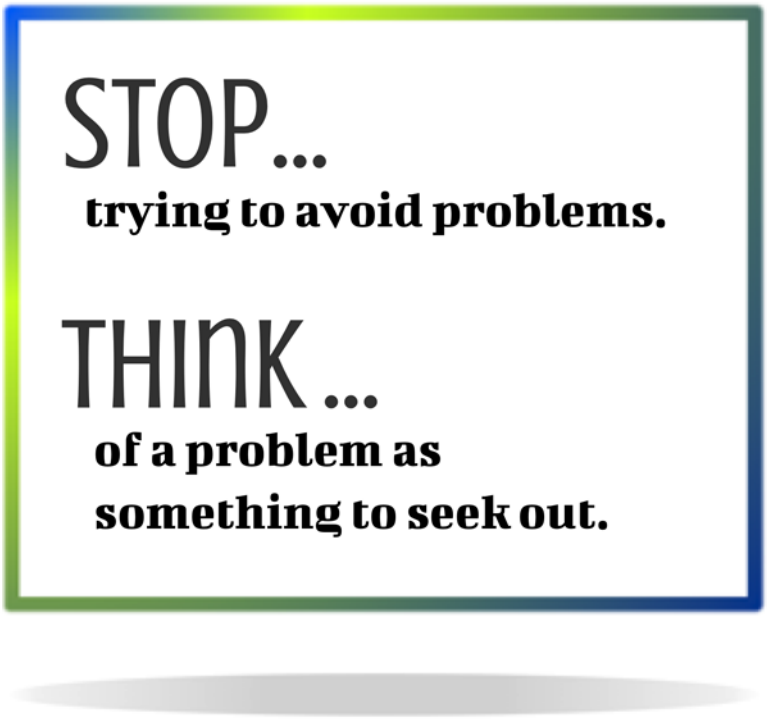
To create is to think of possibilities that do not yet exist. This way of thinking is sometimes referred to as *abductive reasoning* — which involves focusing not on *what is*, but *what could be*. It's not necessarily easy to think this way. Most people look at the world around them and conclude, "That is reality and we better learn to live with it."

But an innovator and inventor like **Dean Kamen** looks at the reality of today's world and sees it as a temporary condition. "Just because something is a reality today, that doesn't mean it has to be a reality tomorrow," Kamen says. "So we're constantly looking at things and asking 'Why? Or why not?'"

Kamen told me that when he is in the process of attempting to change reality by creating something new and innovative, he is often wracked by self-doubt. So if you're feeling uncertain as you explore new possibilities and ponder what might be, know that you're in good company. But it's also worth noting that abductive reasoners tend to gain confidence over time: The more times an innovator has success in changing reality, the more he/she becomes convinced that it's possible to

change reality. So yes, it is hard to change the world — but it does get easier.

13.



It's natural to think of a problem as a "bad" thing. But creative people thrive on problems. If you can solve a problem that nobody else is addressing, you're headed for success. But first you must identify that problem. And embrace it.

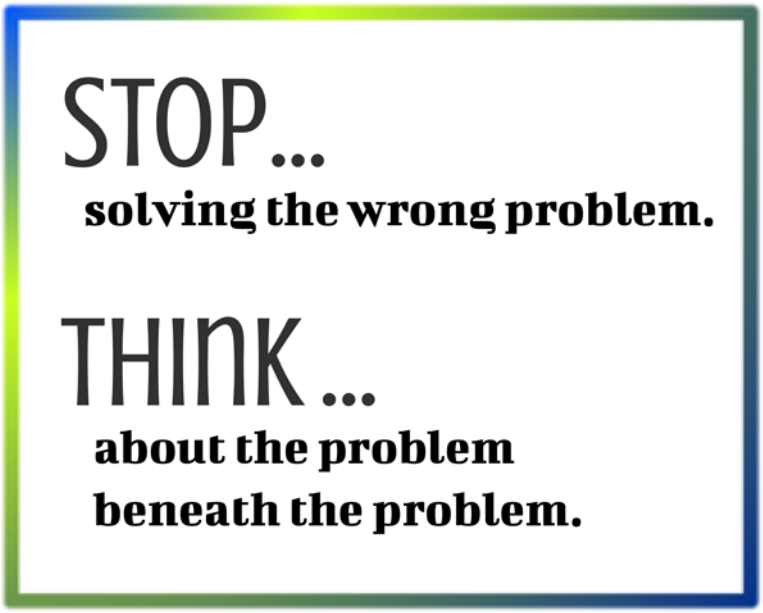
The most creative organizations in the world, such as the design firm IDEO, spend massive amounts of time studying people or immersing themselves in real-world situations so they can learn about problems that are out there waiting to be tackled. Creative companies such as Disney view problems as opportunities; hence, the problem of long lines at Disney World becomes an opportunity to use costumed characters to interact with people in line. The author and futurist **Bob Johansen** refers to this as "dilemma flipping;" you find a problem and flip it to your advantage.

Creative individuals can do this, as well: If you're a solo entrepreneur, you find a problem that the big guys don't want to be bothered with. If

you're an artist or author you seek out the subject or topic that no one else is tackling because it's too hard or too narrow or too controversial.

The problem is the opportunity.

14.



In Japan in the 1940s, the head of Toyota came up with a system of inquiry known as "The 5 Whys." Managers were instructed to ask a series of successive "Why" questions whenever they encountered a problem in order to try to get at the real root of the problem. And so, what might have started out as an issue with a faulty machine part could be revealed, through questioning, as a problem with the workers making that part, and then, going deeper, it might turn out the workers were not being properly trained or equipped, and it would probably turn out there was a reason for that, too. If you kept asking *Why*, you finally arrived at the problem behind the problem behind the problem — and *that* was the thing that needed to be addressed.

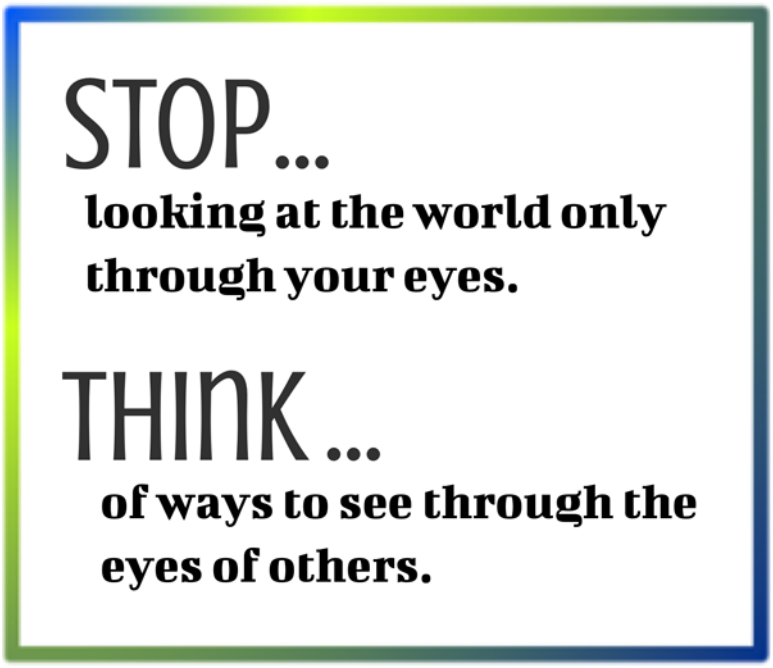
Years later, the 5 Whys approach was picked up by other companies and innovators, and these days one of its strongest proponents is **Eric Ries**, the "lean startup" guru who has noted that this kind of probing of problems can help today's businesses to be more agile and successful.

But this is more than a business tool. It's a creative tool that works as well for individuals as for organizations. Whatever you're working on — whatever problem you're trying to solve, whatever it is you're trying to create — dig beneath the surface to try to get at deeper meanings and motivations. It can end up shining a whole new light on what you're attempting to do and how you're going about it.

There is a problem/conflict/question at the heart of whatever it is you're trying to create. The sooner you identify the "real problem," the sooner you can get to a potential breakthrough. Take your time thinking about the problem.

Albert Einstein once remarked, "If I had an hour to solve a problem — and my life depended on it — I would spend the first 55 minutes trying to make sure I was solving the right problem."

15.



If you're trying to create something useful or compelling — doesn't matter what it is — you need to understand people. (Unless you're creating something for dogs, in which case you need to understand both dogs and the people who own them).

The question is, is how do you get a better understanding of people: of their needs, desires, what moves them, what's missing in their lives? In business, for many years, the most common approach has been to ask people about such things — using surveys, questionnaires, focus groups. But people often can't (or won't) share their candid feelings about what matters most to them.

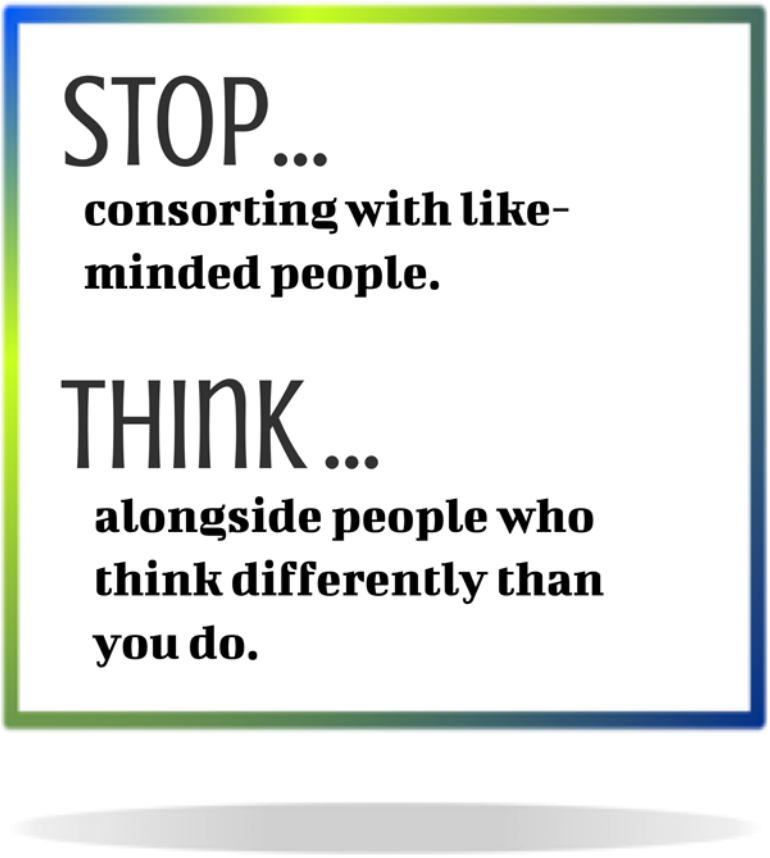
That's why in recent years, cutting-edge marketers, designers, and innovators have come to rely more heavily on observation, listening, and empathy. At firms such as IDEO, design researchers like **Jane Fulton Suri** carefully study people as they go through their daily lives, paying

close attention to the small details of how people use gadgets, make dinner, tend the garden, shop for groceries, etc. This observation often provides the insights and "a-ha moments" that can lead to an innovative idea.

Let's assume you're not part of a large firm and can't hire a team of "ethnographers" to follow people around and study them. You may be one lone creative artist, entrepreneur, or inventor, trying to create something that will have an impact in the world around you. Nevertheless, you still can and should apply some of the same tools used by experts like Fulton Suri — specifically, your eyes and ears.

Immerse yourself in the life experiences of the people you are trying to serve or inspire. Don't rely strictly on second-hand research, gathered online or through static research materials — get out of your bubble. Talk to strangers. Be a fly on many walls. Take notes. Use all that you've gathered to serve as the kindling for your creative fire.

16.

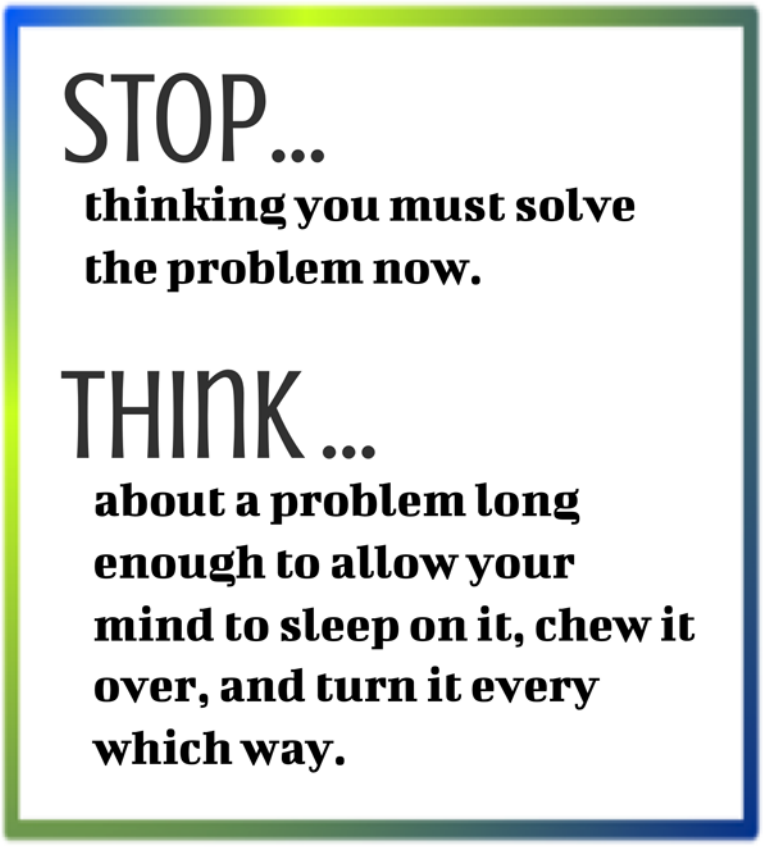


Creativity thrives on diversity. This isn't just speculation; researchers such as **Scott Page** at the University of Michigan have shown it to be true. When people of different backgrounds and experiences come together, they're more likely to fuel each other's creativity (conversely, people of the same background are more apt to reinforce each other's biases when thinking together). Or as the renowned creativity guru **Teresa Amabile** puts it, "When teams comprise people with various intellectual foundations and approaches to work — that is, different expertise and creative thinking styles — ideas often combine and combust in exciting and useful ways."

The good news is that it's possible now, through social networking and other connective tools, to collaborate with people halfway around the world — who may share your creative interests and passions, but not

necessarily your cultural views and background. This offers an opportunity for more eclectic collaboration — and more chances for diverse teams of people to bring their ideas together and allow them to "combine and combust."

17.



We've all heard the expression "Let me sleep on it," but not until recently have we understood why it's so important to do just that. When it comes to problem-solving, the sub-conscious mind does some of its best work when you're sleeping or daydreaming. At these times, the cortex is freed up to conduct more far-reaching searches of the brain's right hemisphere of your brain — looking for remote associations and connections that can yield unexpected, sometimes offbeat insights.

Teresa Amabile (mentioned in the previous section) and other creativity experts refer to an "incubation" period when ideas are gestating. It can take a while for your brain to begin to solve complex problems and

creative challenges — so you have to live with the problem for a while, sleep on it, and allow for incubation. As Amabile says, during the incubation period, "people need time to soak in a problem and let the ideas bubble up."

But it helps if there's something there to incubate — that's why it's important to put in your time thinking about the problem, studying it, taking in information and inspiration, working on it any way you can. All of that provides the raw material, the bits and pieces that your brain can begin to work with as it forges connections and, hopefully, produces "a-ha" insights.

There's nothing wrong with taking your time when you're trying to crack a particularly tough creative nut. As **John Cleese** puts it, "When you defer decisions as long as possible, it's giving your unconscious the maximum amount of time to come up with something."

18.

At some point, most creative people have the depressing and paralyzing thought that "Everything's been done already. There are no original ideas left in the world."

The designer **Jennifer Morla** observed that it can be a tremendous psychological burden for creative people to believe that they must come up with an idea that is completely different from anything that anyone else has ever thought of. You don't necessarily need to be *that* original. There are plenty of great, fresh ideas that build upon ideas that have come before.

Innovators often take something that's "been done already" and re-invent it by giving it a new twist, an added dimension, or a complete makeover. **Steve Jobs** was known for taking products that originated elsewhere and revolutionizing them. He didn't invent the personal music

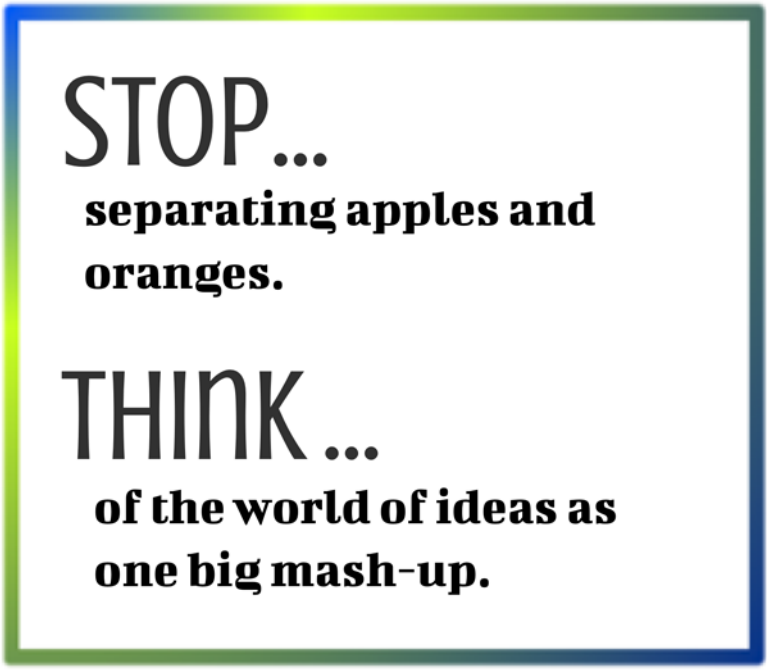
player, he just made it a hell of a lot different and better when he created the iPod.

This is a concept that can be incredibly liberating for creative people. You don't have to invent the wheel. Maybe you just have to find a new way to use the wheel. (This was literally the case with a couple of innovators featured in my book *Glimmer*: There was the guy who combined a wheel and shovel to create a successful hybrid product called the "Wovel," as well as a young woman who put wheels on an alarm clock to create a successful product called the "Clocky," which rolls out of reach when you try to turn it off in the morning).

The designer **John Thackara** uses the term "smart recombinations" to describe these hybrid ideas — and when you start to think of it this way, you find that almost every new creation is a smart recombination of pre-existing objects, ideas, influences. You don't have to create from scratch. There's a world of ideas and possibilities out there, ripe for reinvention.

Don't try to invent the wheel — just give it a new spin.

19.



Expanding on the last point, once we've acknowledged that "smart recombinations" can be a great source of new ideas, how do you begin to come up with these clever combos? You do it through "combinatorial thinking."

Einstein was a big believer in combinatorial thinking. So is **Maria Popova**, creator of the popular "Brain Pickings" blog. Put simply, it's about mixing together existing ideas to try to come up with something new. But to do it well, you must be inventive in the way you mix and match — because the best, most original hybrid ideas often result from combining ideas that might not seem to go together.

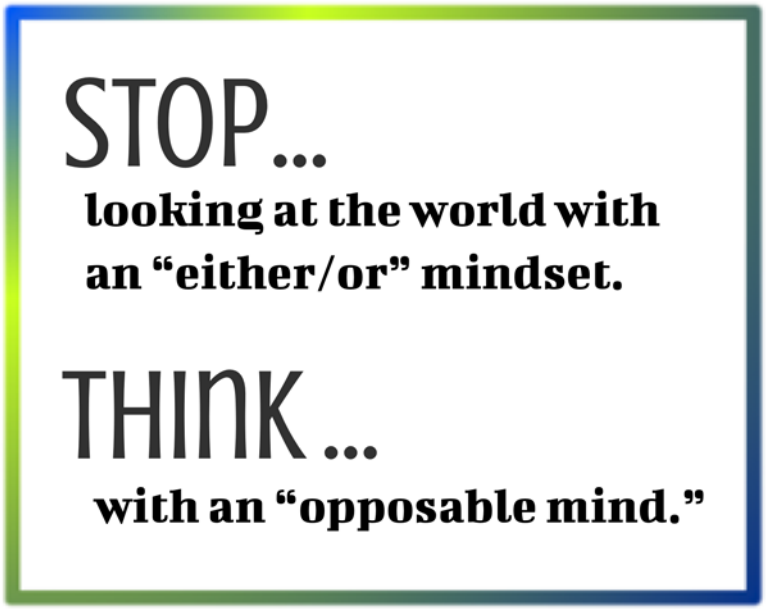
Case in point: The author **Seth Grahame-Smith**, during a visit to a bookstore, noticed that among the best sellers were vampire books and biographies of American historical figures. Grahame-Smith then came

up with a crazy combination — "Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter" — that ended up being a best-selling book and later a film.

The designer **Stefan Sagmeister** told me that he often does creative thinking exercises in which he purposely combines things that might not seem to go together to see if he can develop an interesting new hybrid idea (for example, looking around his office and seeing an image of a fish, then seeing a lamp, Sagmeister began toying with the idea of a fish-influenced lamp). **John Bielenberg** does a similar exercise involving forced combinations of words taken at random from a dictionary.

These combinatorial thinking exercises may not necessary produce a useful idea at the time you're doing them — but they can help condition your mind so that it becomes more adept at combining ideas in fresh, interesting ways.

20.



Tackling a creative challenge is often about making difficult choices: *Do I move in this direction or that one? Is "approach A" better than "approach B"?* But if you break down your creative options into wrong/right choices, you may be oversimplifying — and limiting your possibilities. Creative thinkers should be willing and able to consider multiple, oft-conflicting possibilities — and they may find that, in the end, the best ideas take a little from "column A" and a bit from "column B." **Roger Martin**, the dean of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, has referred to this as "integrative thinking" or thinking with an "opposable mind."

Most of us, according to Martin, try to simplify problems and make clear-cut choices. We strive to construct a single, clear "mental model" when we're thinking about a challenge and trying to envision a solution. But the best creative thinkers, Martin says, are comfortable holding conflicting ideas in their heads at the same time — and they often arrive at a synthesis that contains elements of both ideas, but improves on each.

So if you find yourself torn between two great ideas or approaches, consider the possibility of finding a "best of both worlds" solution.

21.

There's a natural tendency to look for ideas close to home. For example, advertising creative people scan the advertising award books, while thriller writers look to see what other thriller writers are doing.

But sometimes the best way to be inspired by new influences is to look outside your domain. I've encountered, for example, a bank entrepreneur whose radical idea for reinventing banks came from looking at how hotels do business. Likewise, a car designer told me one of his best ideas was inspired by helicopter designs.

It makes sense that the influences likely to inspire the most original ideas will tend to come from far afield. If you're looking for ideas in the expected places, you're looking in the same place as everyone else in

your field — which means the ideas you come up with are likely to be similar to those discovered by your peers.

The legendary designer and ad man **George Lois** says many of his best ideas have come from unexpected sources that seemingly had nothing to do with whatever he was working on at the time. From the church, from the ballet, from the streets — Lois finds creative inspiration all around him. And he tries to expose himself to as many rich and diverse cultural influences as possible, in hopes that this will allow him to bring a wider range of ideas, styles, and references to his work.

Dan Wieden, of the renowned creative ad agency Wieden & Kennedy, once told me that one of the biggest problems among young creative people in advertising is that they spend too much time studying the work of other advertising creators.

Wieden wanted them to be inspired by anything *but* other ad people. So he went out of his way to invite fine artists, classical musicians, and others who had nothing to do with making ads to visit his agency and inspire the staff. This may be one reason why Wieden & Kennedy's famous ads often ended up being radically different from other ads — and chockfull of unusual, interesting cultural influences and references.

By digging outside their own front yard, Wieden's team was much more apt to find unexpected treasures.

22.

We've all heard of *déjà vu*, the sensation you get when you're in a strange place or circumstance yet somehow feel as if you've "been there before." But let's reverse that: Suppose you're in a situation that is very familiar — perhaps you're driving to work or doing something else that you've done a hundred times before — and you suddenly feel as if you're experiencing something completely new. This is *vuja de*, and it could be a key to becoming a more creative thinker. If you can train yourself to look at familiar situations or scenarios and try to see them anew, this fresh perspective could help you become aware of creative possibilities that no one else is noticing.

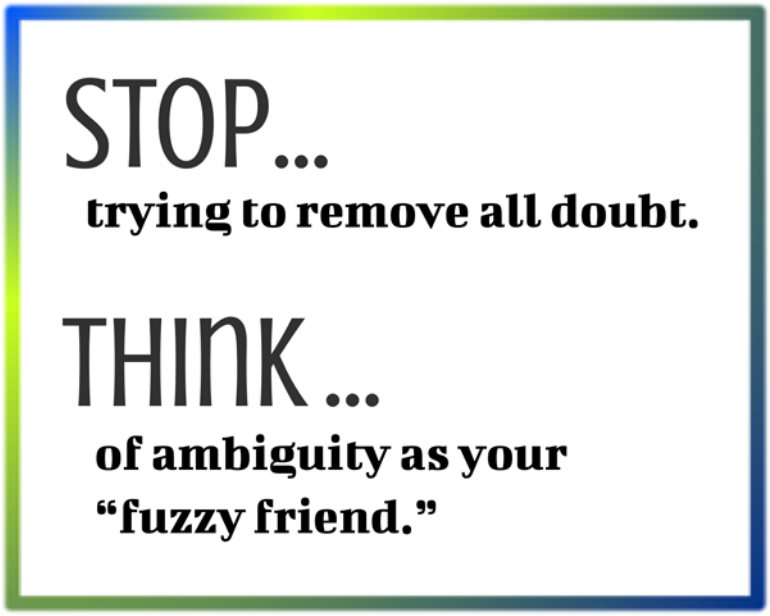
The concept of *vuja de* seems to have originated with the comedian **George Carlin**, who coined this made-up term when, in mid-standup routine, he told his audience that he'd just experienced "vuja de — the

strange feeling that, somehow, none of this has ever happened before." Carlin was kidding, but when you think about it, any great comedian must be able to summon that *vuja de* perspective quite regularly, as they keenly observe the everyday world around them. It's how they're able to notice and comment on all the little quirks and curiosities that the rest of us take for granted.

This fresh-eye perspective can benefit anyone tackling creative endeavors. There are sources of inspiration all around — but you may need *vuja de* vision to see them.

How do you practice *vuja de*? In his book, *Weird Ideas That Work,* **Bob Sutton** shares the following: *"The vuja de mentality is the ability to keep shifting opinion and perception… It means thinking of things that are usually assumed to be negative as positive, and vice versa. It can mean reversing assumptions about cause and effect, or what matters most versus least. It means not traveling through life on automatic pilot."*

23.



Does uncertainty make you uncomfortable? If so, you might want to learn to tolerate some of that discomfort, because it could be good for your creative work. The great designer **Milton Glaser** is a big believer in embracing ambiguity, both during the creative process and in the finished results.

In terms of the former, Glaser thinks that when people have a creative idea and begin to give it form, they may be too quick to try to finalize it. Working on a computer, it can be easy to quickly polish your idea and achieve "closure," but it would be better, Glaser contends, to "keep things fuzzy" for a while. As long as an idea is in the "fuzzy" stages, you're more apt to play with it — to try variations and alternatives. But if you've already smoothed the rough edges, dotted all the i's, and created something that seems finished, you may be reluctant to mess with that.

As for the finished work, Glaser thinks that you should always leave something for the audience to figure out or complete. Don't spell everything out for people. "The mind loves a puzzle," Glaser says.

We're all programmed to respond to the challenge of trying to solve a mystery or fill in the gaps. So be willing to leave things fuzzy — both for yourself and for everyone else.

24.

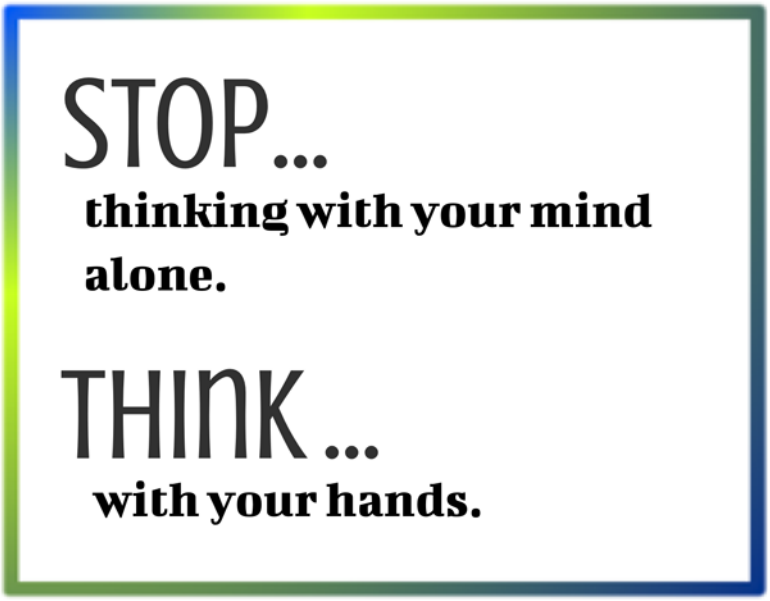
The problem with just talking about ideas is that all you're left with are words that vanish in the air. There is nothing tangible to come back to; nothing to show people or pass around; nothing that can be put out into the world in order to get feedback.

Innovative designers figured this out long ago, and that's why the best of them do prototyping in the earliest stages of the creative process. Don't be put off by that technical-sounding word "prototyping" — as **Diego Rodriguez** of IDEO explains, "Anything can be a prototype." It can take the form of a sketch on the back of a napkin; a collage you make with scissors and glue; a chart or visualization you create on the computer; or a three-dimensional mock-up you've assembled by hand. A detailed written outline can serve as a prototype for a book you want to write. A beta site can be a prototype for a website you want to create.

The form doesn't matter. And it needn't be pretty. In fact, fast-and-rough is a good way to go when creating early representations of an idea. Many of us are conditioned to think that you shouldn't put anything out there for others to see until it's perfect. But a rough sketch or imperfect model is a perfectly fine starting point. It signals to others that this is a young idea, still developing, open to input and change.

Most important, it tells everyone (including yourself) that the idea is real. It exists. It isn't just hot air.

25.



Thinking is great. But have you tried "thinkering?"

A blend of *thinking* and *tinkering*, this wonderful term is used widely today in design and education circles, but one of its early appearances was in **Michael Ondaatje**'s novel *The English Patient*, which referred to the act of "collecting a thought as one tinkers with a half-completed bicycle."

There are two versions of thinkering. One might involve tinkering with something — say, a bicycle or Lego blocks — that has nothing to do with the larger creative challenge that's on your mind. But just that simple act of doing something with your hands seems to free your mind to roam and "collect thoughts."

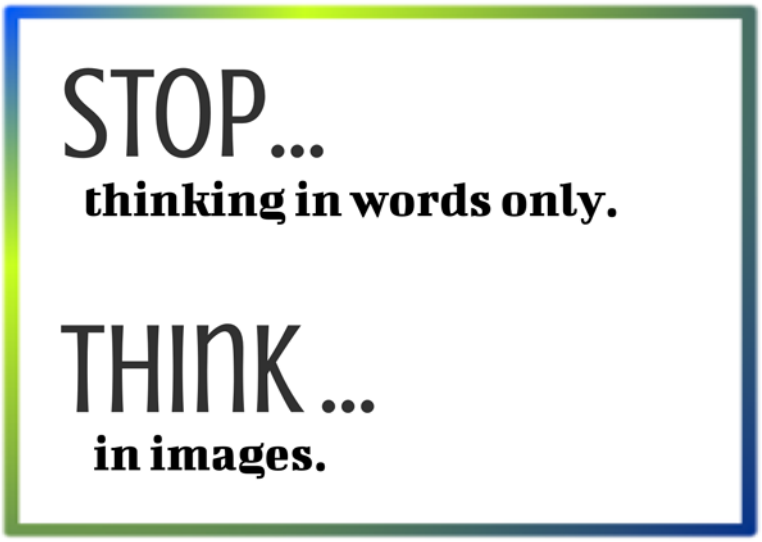
There is also the kind of "thinkering" that's more directly relevant to the creative challenge at hand — this may involve somehow playing with the ideas you're working on. Which brings us back to prototyping or developing some form of physical model of your ideas. We talked

earlier about why it's important to give form to ideas in order to get feedback, but it's also true that building and playing with ideas stimulates the imagination. **Tim Brown** of the innovation firm IDEO believes in "building to think." Brown says, "Through the act of making things, we find that we learn about ideas."

Either way, this form of work/play seems to provide a creative spark. "When our hands are used, we engage an increased portion of our minds," says **Jacqueline Lloyd Smith**, who has worked with Lego on its "Serious Play" program, which explored the benefits of "play" on creativity. The author and scientist **John Seely Brown** says that when we tinker and play, "we create knowledge on the fly by experimenting with the things around us."

So it's clear: To be a better thinker, you must "thinker."

26.



We tend to think of drawing as a way to depict ideas, which it is. Many innovators begin their work with sketches because it allows for fast and freeform consideration of multiple ideas. A sketch is easy to make (you don't have to be a skilled artist — stick figures can get the job done), easy to understand, and easy to change.

But interestingly, the act of drawing or sketching can also help you *search* for ideas. The act of "exploratory sketching" is described by the designer **Milton Glaser** as follows: "There is a dialectic that exists between sketching and the way the brain functions, between the hand and the mind," Glaser says. "When you're searching for an idea, often you'll create an ambiguous sketch of it. And the brain looks at that and says, 'Ah, it could be this or that,' and then the hand transmits what the brain has observed and makes the sketch less fuzzy. Then the brain says, 'Maybe it should be this,' and the hand accommodates again — and this conversation between the hand and the brain results in the development of an idea."

These days, there are various apps and programs that can help you to draw digitally. But really, there's no substitute for pencil and paper (even the back of a napkin will do). The more raw your sketches, the better — they should reflect the untamed, chaotic nature of creative thinking.

27.

Too many people keep their best ideas stashed in a drawer. They're afraid to show those ideas to anyone — sometimes they're even afraid to talk about them. The thinking seems to be that ideas are precious and everyone is out to steal them.

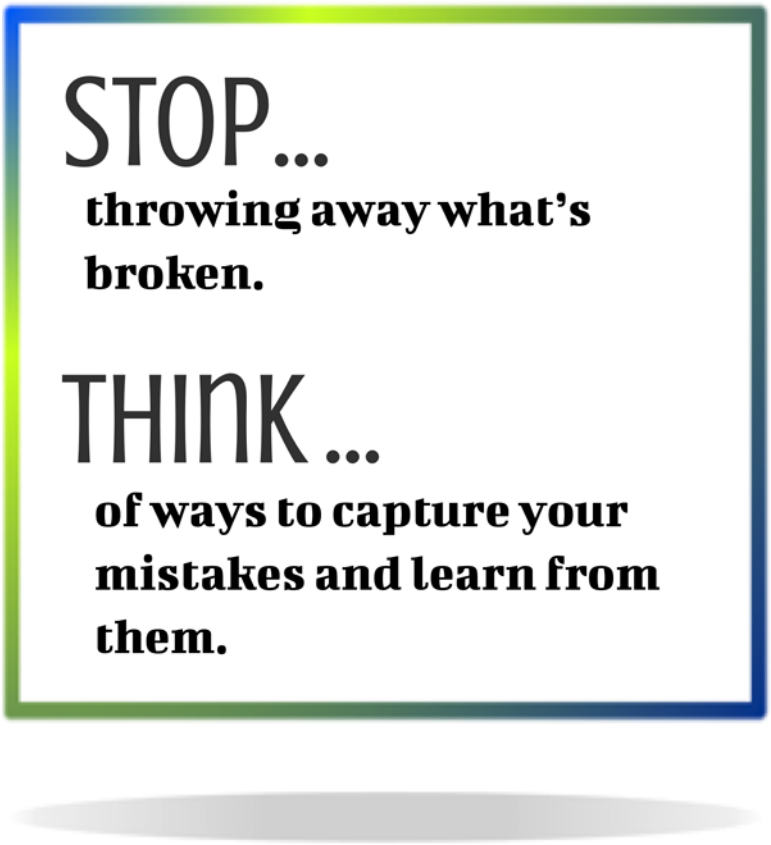
But the reality is, ideas do not have value until you actually do something with them. So at some point, you'll have to take them out of the drawer. And generally, the sooner you do this — and the more willing you are to show the idea to others and get feedback — the greater the chances that your idea will turn into something valuable.

I learned an interesting lesson about this during my years observing the ad industry. Often, the least creative ad agencies were also the ones where people tended to hide and guard their campaign ideas, out of fear that someone in the next cubicle might steal them.

But at the more creative agencies, such as Chiat/Day, ideas were posted on the wall for all to see. The creative director of the agency, **Lee Clow**, felt that a good idea should be able to withstand scrutiny — and assumed (rightly) that the creator of the idea would probably benefit by having others comment on that idea, make suggestions, etc. And as for people stealing each other's ideas? Well, it's actually harder to steal an idea once it has been posted on the wall because everybody knows who put it up there.

Which is not to say ideas never get stolen; sometimes they do. So do cars, but does that mean you'll never take yours out of the garage?

28.



If you've done anything creative that didn't work (and who hasn't?), you have two choices: You can try to erase the whole experience from your memory and destroy all evidence of it. Or you can view your past mistakes as sources of learning that can fuel new ideas and fresh opportunities.

Most people do the former — probably because we're led to believe that a failure is something to be avoided, abandoned, ashamed of, etc. But what's becoming increasingly clear — especially in today's culture of constant innovation — is that failure has gotten a bad rap. It is often a critical step on the path to invention and creation. Research shows that individuals and organizations that are particularly creative and prolific tend to fail a lot. It comes with the territory. For these highly-creative types, "failure is inevitable — so the key to success is to be good at

learning from it," says Stanford University's **Bob Sutton**. And yet most people don't do that: As a recent issue of *Wired* magazine observed, the problem "isn't that most experiments fail — it's that most failures are ignored."

Anything you've done that didn't work contains important lessons on what doesn't work — which is part of figuring out what *does* work. So what should you do with your failures? Study them for clues on what to try next. And perhaps more importantly, *celebrate* them. They are evidence of a spirit that is eager to experiment, willing to fail, and ready to learn.

29.

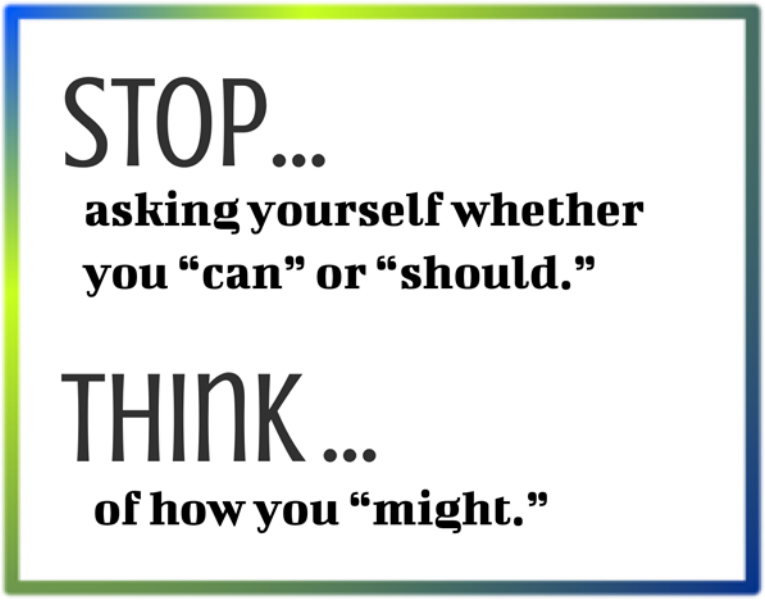
Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "Look sharply after your thoughts. They come unlooked for, like a new bird seen in your trees, and, if you turn to your usual tasks, disappear."

That line is quoted in creativity expert **Michael Michalko**'s excellent book *Thinkertoys*, wherein Michalko talks about the importance of capturing these "idea birds" before they fly away, never to be seen again. How you "capture" the ideas is up to you. Carry a pocket tape recorder (or just use a "record" app on your smart phone). Carry a tiny moleskin notepad. Or a full-sized notebook — that's what designer **Michael Bierut** brings with him wherever he goes, so there's room not only to jot down a few words but to sketch and draw, if the idea lends itself to that expression.

Once you capture the idea you don't want to forget about it — leaving it lost in captivity. Notebooks must be kept handy and flipped through often; recordings should be transcribed and tacked on the bulletin board.

Or you might want to try this approach, recommended by Michalko: Capture your ideas on cards or small slips of paper and put them in a box. Then every so often, shake the box, reach in — and pull out an idea bird. And see if it's ready to fly.

30.



When you're tackling tough creative challenges, you may occasionally find yourself thinking, "How am I ever going to solve this problem?" Or, "What on earth should I do now?"

In those instances, one of the first things to do is re-phrase those questions to be more open and optimistic. The language you use when problem-solving is important — which is why innovative companies like Google, Facebook, and IDEO try to avoid asking, "What are we going to do now?" or "How should we solve this problem?" Instead, they train their people to ask, "*How might we?*"

It's a subtle change that can make a big difference in sparking creative thinking. The creative consultant **Min Basadur**, who teaches the *How Might We* (HMW) form of questioning to companies trying to innovate, explains that "as soon as you start using words like *can* and *should*, you're implying judgment: Can we really do it? And should we?" By substituting the word *might*, he says, "you're able to defer judgment,

which helps people to create options more freely, and opens up more possibilities."

Tim Brown, of the innovation firm IDEO, says his firm always tackles creative challenges by asking *How Might We*. Brown observes that within the phrase, each of those three words plays a role in spurring creative problem-solving. "The 'how' part assumes there are solutions out there — it provides creative confidence," Brown says. "'Might' says we can put ideas out there that might work or might not — either way, it's OK. And the 'we' part says we're going to do it together and build on each other's ideas."

If you're working solo, just swap out "I" for "we" and it's just as effective, says Basadur. So next time you find yourself asking, "How am I ever going to come up with something original?" or "How can I break through all the noise?," tweak that question by using the m-word. Will it help ideas flow more easily? It just might.

31.

It's easy to fall in love with an idea too soon. According to **Edward DeBono**, whose ideas on "lateral thinking" have influenced many of today's great creative minds, a lateral thinker begins the creative process by "exploring wide, not deep." That means generating multiple ideas without moving forward (or moving vertically) on a particular idea.

The point is to gather as many ideas as possible while you're in the idea-generation mode. DeBono stresses the importance of suspending judgment of ideas during these early stages. The idea may turn out to be flawed but you don't have to determine that right away. "With lateral thinking," DeBono writes, "one is allowed to be wrong on the way even though one must be right in the end."

The benefit of exploring wide and generating/considering many ideas early on is that you don't settle for the ideas that happen to arrive first. And that's important because those early-bird ideas are often the "easy"

ones — the ones the brain can come up with based on familiar thought patterns.

But ideas that are thought of easily also tend to be less original; they're the ones that are probably popping into other people's heads, too. So a wider exploration will help you get to the more unusual ideas (which is not to say your first idea might not end up being best in the end, but you should at least give it some competition). Another advantage of coming up with many ideas upfront is that you have some backup ideas available to you if your chosen idea doesn't work.

32.

Let's face it: If you've got a creative mind, it's not that hard to come up with half-baked new ideas. And it can be fun thinking them up, tossing them out there for discussion, entertaining the wide-open blue-sky possibilities. But there's a point at which you must — after falling in love with an idea — commit to that idea. And try to foster a relationship with it. And stop having your head turned by every cute new idea that comes along.

Scott Belsky, head of the creative network Behance and author of *Making Ideas Happen*, explains that "a surplus of ideas is as dangerous as a drought. The tendency to jump from idea to idea spreads your energy horizontally instead of vertically."

Belsky advises that in order to stop jumping from one idea to the next, you must develop a clear course of action for each of your ideas — one that forces you to stay focused and keep taking next steps.

Sticking with your ideas takes discipline. There will be times you may feel sick of grappling with a particular idea. And times when you may get stuck and have trouble moving forward with it. It's at those times that you'll be tempted to abandon the hard work of idea development and revert back to the more fun stage of idea-generation.

But heed Belsky's message: Anyone can come up with ideas. The question is, Do you have what it takes to make the idea actually happen?

33.

We've all had those dark moments when a creative project we're working on seems to grind to a halt. When that happens, what do you do to keep things moving forward?

Scott Belsky, mentioned in the preceding section, has some excellent ideas on this in his book *Making Ideas Happen*. One of Belsky's key points is that you must have a work process in place, and stick to the process. A process can direct you on what to do next, even when you have no idea what you're doing.

Belsky acknowledges that most creative types have a built-in resistance to organizational processes because, well, it's just not all that creative. We'd much rather be dreaming up the next idea — which is why so many ideas never get past the dreaming stage and into the "doing" stage. But every idea you're serious about should be treated as a formal work project. And to keep that project moving forward, you must constantly be thinking about — and writing down — the next "Action Steps" to be taken.

Sounds simple and maybe even obvious, but it's profound stuff. And it's something that many of the most successful creative people do, on a daily basis. For example, Belsky shows us how **Bob Greenberg (**head of the R/GA interactive design marketing firm) handwrites his own Action Steps every day, using a specific set of colored markers and always organizing his list in exactly the same way.

Belsky also urges us to build supportive communities around the ideas we're working on — which can help you through the rough spots. If you get stuck, you can ask for advice or ideas from the community. And if other people have an interest or stake in your project they're likely to encourage (pressure) you to keep going when you hit those occasional stopping points.

34.

Whatever you're working on, it's a safe bet that you're probably constrained in some way. You could use more time. Or more resources — maybe someone to help you do research. The challenge itself may come with limitations: maybe you must work within a designated format, or you may have to serve a market that demands a creation that is affordable (if only you were free to produce a more luxurious version!)

It's natural to complain about limitations and constraints, but you really should be thankful for them. Constraints set the parameters that guide the creative process and provide a sense of purpose and direction. They can help you get a toehold as you're beginning your work.

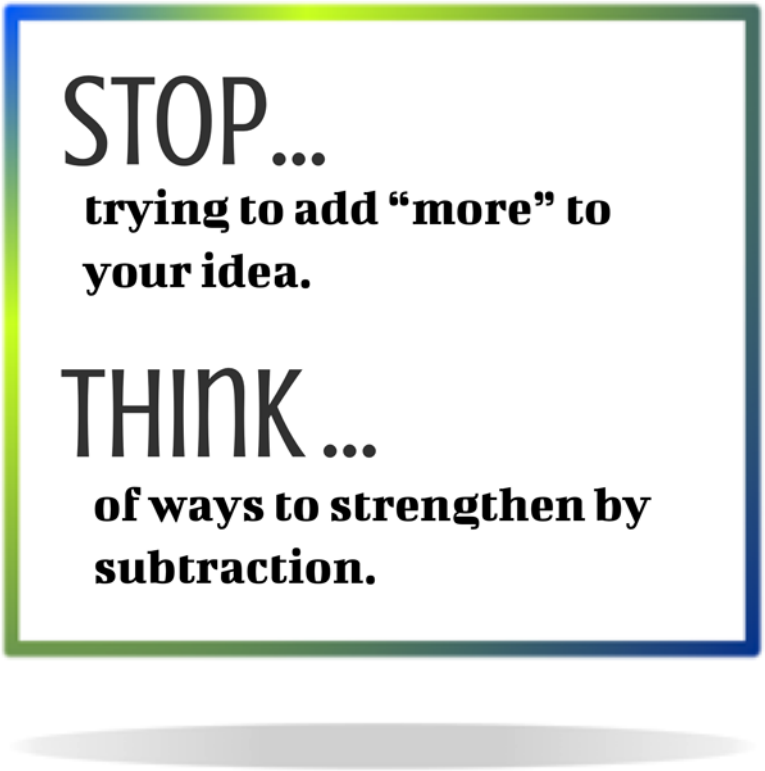
An inventor named **Jock Brandis** once commented to me, "Constraints make you more creative, or at least that's how it works for me. If you've got all kinds of options available to you, then how do you know what to

do or where to begin? But if all I've got to work with is some wood and cement and maybe a bicycle wheel, I'm ready to go."

Professional designers are used to working with constraints and they tend to welcome them. "The more constraints there are, the greater the opportunity to be creative and deliver something really new and worthwhile," says **Karim Rashid**. His fellow superstar designer, **Yves Behar**, told me that constraints actually fire his imagination: If someone asks him to design a laptop, that's kind of ho-hum. But when someone says, "We want you to design a great laptop that costs less than $100 — and no one has ever done this before," that's when Behar starts envisioning ways to achieve that breakthrough.

What's true for designers is true for every creative person taking on a challenge, because "every project worth doing comes with constraints," observes author **Seth Godin**. And, he adds, "If you can thrive in a world filled with constraints, it's ever easier to do well when those constraints are loosened."

35.



Whatever you're creating has a complex version and a simpler version. The simpler version is invariably better. It is more focused; easier for people to appreciate, understand or use; it is more elegant; and more purposeful.

So why do we start out making our creative endeavors so complicated? Why do we often begin by saying, "I want to do this, but I also want to achieve that, and I'd like to encompass all of this, and by the way, there will be 37 versions."

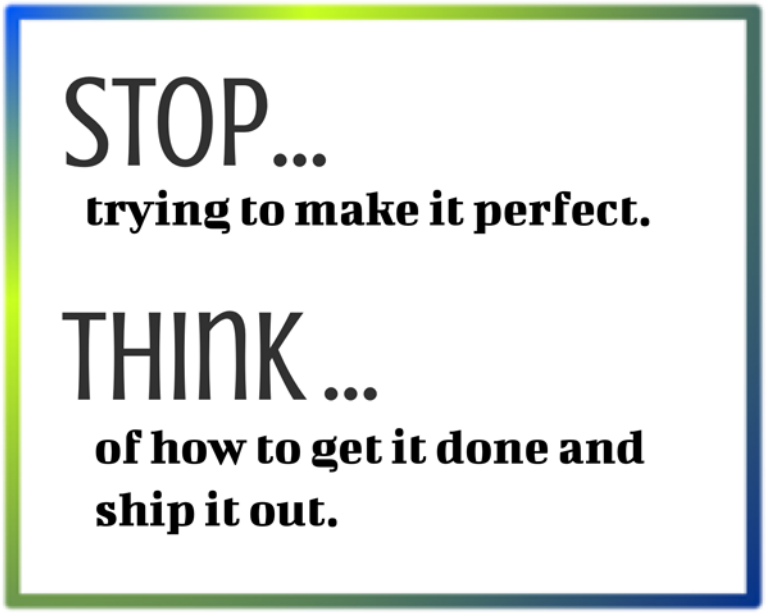
The simplicity expert **Alan Siegel** says there are all kinds of reasons why people make things too complicated: They're trying to cover all the bases; prove how smart they are; or they're just too lazy to simplify.

It's not easy to hone your idea to its essence. You must remove everything that is superfluous and expendable (and you may be loathe to get rid of some of those things). You must edit, distill, and subtract.

Matthew E. May, author of *The Laws of Subtraction,* maintains that in today's "age of excess everything" we have a better chance of getting people's attention and firing their imaginations by offering less, not more. To subtract, May says, one must practice "the art of removing anything excessive, confusing, wasteful, unnatural, hazardous, hard to use, or ugly." Or better yet, have the discipline to refrain from adding those things in the first place.

Simplification is easier at the beginning than at the end. If you can pare down your idea early on, it will give you more focus and direction throughout the rest of the creative process.

36.



The author/marketing guru **Seth Godin** has a word he uses often and persuasively, and that word is *ship*. As Godin sees it, too many people are unwilling or unable to pull the trigger on projects, dreams, creations. They are leery of putting their ideas out into the world to see what happens. They are afraid to ship.

And that fear is understandable. "Shipping is fraught with risk and danger," Godin has written in *Seth's Blog*. "Every time you raise your hand, send an email, launch a product or make a suggestion, you're exposing yourself to criticism." If you ship, Godin adds, "you might fail. If you ship, we might laugh at you."

But it's the chance you must take as a creative person because, as Godin puts it, "Real artists ship."

And the most successful ones tend to ship often. In today's intensely competitive marketplace, the more ideas and creations you put out there,

the better your chances of breaking through. If you're holding back and banking everything on one big hit, now *that's* risky. Your idea, good as it may be, might get lost in the noise, for countless reasons beyond your control. But if you keep coming back with more ideas, and more after that, you can build the kind of volume and momentum that's needed.

In order to be able to ship often, you must be willing to ship early. **Mark Zuckerberg** of Facebook says, "We have the words 'Done is better than perfect' painted on our walls to remind ourselves to always keep shipping."

Guy Kawasaki, the author and former Apple evangelist who was responsible for marketing the Macintosh when it was introduced in 1984, says the company could have held back and kept trying to make the product perfect, "but if you wait for ideal circumstances, the market will pass you by." So Apple didn't wait: "Revolutionary means you ship and then test," Kawasaki says. "Lots of things made the first Mac in 1984 a piece of crap — but it was a revolutionary piece of crap."

37.

We all have a million things to do, every day. But the problem, in terms of creative thinking, isn't necessarily that we have too much to do. It's that we spend too much time *thinking about* all those little chores and worries. And these pesky "small thoughts" can get in the way of thinking about bigger things.

The problem is articulated well by the creative coach **Dr. Eric Maisel** in his book *Brainstorm: Harnessing the Power of Productive Obsessions*, as well as in a recent interview Maisel did with the newsletter *IdeaConnection*.

"Small thoughts steal neurons," Maisel says. "These aren't necessarily bad thoughts; they're just small thoughts such as 'I need to pick the kids up at 3 pm.' Because so many neurons are being stolen all the time, we don't have the experience of having our whole brain available to think bigger thoughts."

While it can be hard to stop obsessing over *what you need to do later today* and *what you must remember to do right after that*, Maisel recommends that you focus on what he calls a "productive obsession" — an idea that "you choose for good reason and pursue with all your brain's power." If you're working on a creative project, *that's* your productive obsession; and it deserves every bit of brainpower you can muster for a given period of time

This brings us back to **John Cleese**'s aforementioned "tortoise enclosure" approach: You may need to designate a remote place where you make every effort to cut yourself off not only from electronic devices, but also from daily to-do lists (whether they're on paper or floating around in your head). As Maisel notes, there's no magical trick to getting yourself to think big over small; you have to will yourself to do it, overcoming the natural tendency to avoid deep thinking (because it's harder than small thinking).

Most of all, Maisel says, "We need to just show up, and sit and think." For a few hours, force yourself to forget the daily to-do list, so you can tackle what's on your lifetime to-do list.

38.

Creativity is a form of play and should always be viewed as such. If a daunting creative challenge is approached with a "serious adult" mindset, that challenge may appear to be impractical, unrealistic, worrisome, potentially draining, possibly unproductive, risky, etc. But if it's approached with more of a childlike attitude, that same challenge can seem exciting, energizing, rich with possibility, and, in a word, fun.

A few years ago, I learned about a series of playful experiments in which groups of young children were assembled in teams and challenged to build a structure using uncooked spaghetti sticks, string, tape, and a marshmallow. The idea was to build the tallest structure, topped by the marshmallow, all within a designated time limit. But here's the interesting part: The same test was given to adult MBA students, to see how their results would compare to those of the young kids. As you might guess, the kids generally did a lot better. While the

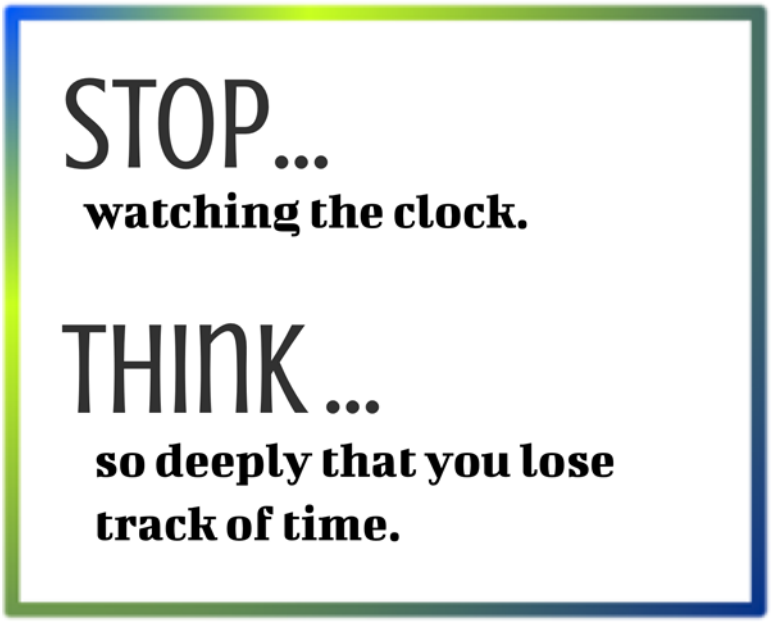
adults were over-analyzing the situation (and arguing about who was in charge), the kids dove right into the challenge, began experimenting, trying various combinations, making mistakes and learning from them. To the adults, this whole challenge was a frustrating task; to the kids, it was play.

Joi Ito, who heads up the Media Lab at M.I.T., has argued that we need to retain childlike qualities in order to do a better job of creating, innovating, and solving the complex problems of today's (and tomorrow's) world. Ito uses the term "neoteny" to describe "the retention of childlike attributes in adulthood."

"When we are young, we learn, we socialize, we play, we experiment, we are curious, we feel wonder, we feel joy, we change, we grow, we imagine, we hope," Ito wrote in his blog. The problem, he noted, is that "most of us stop playing when we become adults and focus on work."

There's no reason for this separation of "play" and "work," especially if you're involved in a creative endeavor. We are fortunate enough to be doing the kind of work that calls for imaginative leaps; and the greater the challenge, the bigger the leaps. What could be more fun?

39.



Sometimes I wonder if creative people shouldn't throw away their wristwatches, or at least put them in a drawer occasionally. Because creativity, in its purest form, seems to thrive in a realm where time is forgotten.

Readers familiar with the work of the psychologist and author **Mihalhyi Csíkszentmihályi** will know about his concept of "flow," but for those who don't, Csíkszentmihályi says the condition is characterized by being totally immersed and completely engaged in what you are doing — to the extent that time seems to stop. People who are in the state of flow "experience intense concentration and enjoyment, coupled with peak performance," he says. The kinds of activities that can bring us into this state are ones that involve a challenge — but there is a delicate balance involved. The challenge should be difficult, but it should also be one that we "feel confident we can handle with our existing skills."

If you find yourself frequently checking your watch or eyeing the clock as you work, it may mean the work you're doing is not stimulating enough to draw you into the "flow" state. In that case, it may be time to up the ante and take on a better challenge.

However, if you're fortunate enough to have found the right kind of challenge — one that matches up nicely with your existing skills yet also pushes you to rise to a new level of creativity — then you're probably one of those lucky people who loses track of the time while you're working. That's a great "state" to be in — and you should do everything in your power to return to that "timeless" place as often as you can, and stay as long as you can. And don't bring a watch.

40.

This is a close cousin to the idea discussed earlier, about the importance of shipping. The more willing you are to put your ideas and your work out into the world, the more likely it is that your work may be judged imperfect or flawed. When that happens, you may not achieve everything you first set out to accomplish. And some might consider that a failure. It's the reason why creative people sometimes hold back on finishing work or sharing it with the world. They may believe that if they can do just one more revision, or just polish the thing a few more times, they can lessen the chances of having their work judged as a failure.

But a lot of the most successful creators and innovators don't indulge this fear; in fact, they don't even see "failure" the same way others do. They're more likely to understand that every misstep leads you somewhere — it shows what works and doesn't work, reveals lessons

about how you might have done things differently, and provides guidelines on how to do it better next time.

This is the reason why innovation-driven companies today have tried to foster a culture in which failure is seen as a part of the creative process. Firms such as IDEO and Google embrace a "fail early, fail often" philosophy. **Mark Zuckerberg** of Facebook refers to the "Hacker Way" of creating things, which involves "quickly releasing and learning from smaller iterations rather than trying to get everything right all at once." But to be able to release iterations quickly, you must be willing to accept that there will be small failures along the way.

If a creative person is willing to fail more, they're likely to succeed more. At least that is the finding of Professor **Dean Keith Simonton**, who has conducted studies on successful creative people. "Creativity is a consequence of sheer productivity," Simonton says. "If a creator wants to increase the production of hits, he or she must do so by risking a parallel increase in the production of misses… The most successful creators tend to be those with the most failures."

41.

Picking up on the previous theme of being willing to fail, there's a great line that comes from the author **Sir Ken Robinson**, who said during his 2006 TED speech: "If you are not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with something original."

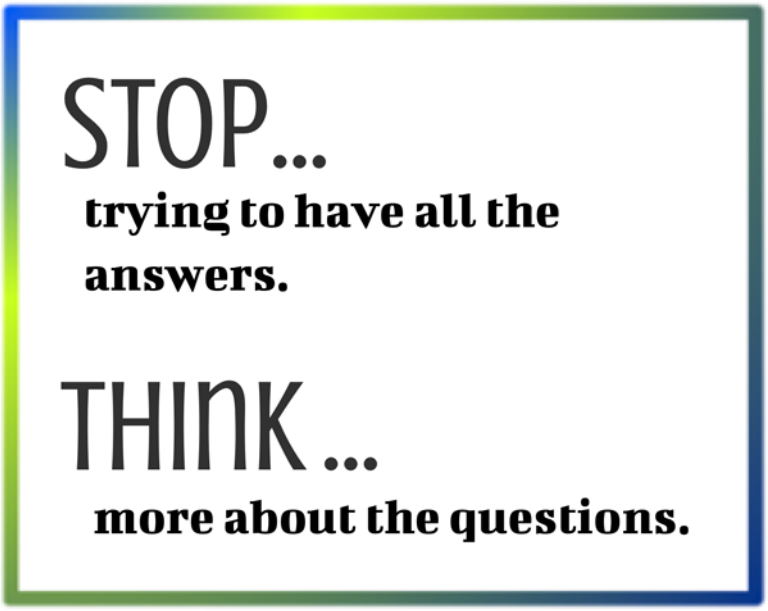
Indeed, this is another problem with fear of failure: It can cause people to set the creative bar lower — to go for the "good" instead of the "great," or the more comfortable "familiar" instead of the more scary "original."

This is what we should be concerned about: not the risk of failing, but the risk of automatically settling for less. "For most of us, the problem isn't that we aim too high and fail," Robinson says. "It's just the opposite — we aim too low and succeed."

The only way to avoid that is to live by the principle that **Jay Chiat** and **Lee Clow** turned into a mantra at their agency Chiat/Day: "Good enough is not enough."

It's a philosophy that pushes you toward choosing the riskier, more original idea; and then encourages you to take that idea to the highest level of creative expression. Yes, maybe you could get away with something less; work that is "good enough" may be easier to do, perhaps even easier to sell. But if you're a passionate creative person, in the end, that's still "not enough."

42.



I end with this one because I think it is the most important.

Of course, I may be biased about this. I am currently writing a book — and am presently steeped in research — about the importance of asking questions. But I'm not alone in thinking there is a profound link between questioning and creativity/innovation. Albert Einstein, Steve Jobs, Pablo Picasso, the folks behind Google — they've all preached about the critical importance of asking great questions. As **Richard Saul Wurman**, creator of the TED Conference, puts it: "Asking the right question will take you a lot further than getting the right answer."

What does this mean to you as you embark on your next big creative challenge or entrepreneurial venture? It's a question I shall try to answer at length in my next book, but here are a few key thoughts:

- If you're willing and able to question the world around you at every turn, it can help spark ideas and fuel your creativity.
- Great questioners look at the same reality that others simply accept, and ask: "Why are things the way they are?" "What if we

tried something different?" "How might we achieve a better result?"

- If you take the time and effort to figure out the "beautiful question" that is at the root of your creative endeavor, it can help guide you on the journey to find an answer, solution, or breakthrough.
- Questioning is an art, but it is also a science. It is possible to learn how to be a better questioner. And it is also possible to employ a systematic process that can help you get from a beautiful question to a game-changing answer.

Regarding the value of inquiry, perhaps the poet **ee cummings** said it best (or at least, most elegantly) when he wrote:

"Always the beautiful answer
Who asks a more beautiful question."

Hope you'll stop and think about that for a few moments.

Good luck on your creative journey.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

In pursuit of "A More Beautiful Question"

The insights in this book were gathered during my years of interviewing, observing, studying, and doing research on some of the world's top creative thinkers and innovators.

There are a lot of things that great creative thinkers have in common — but one of the most important, I believe, is that they tend to be insatiably curious. They observe. They listen and learn. They question.

Questioning is often the starting point for innovation — in the business world, in the arts, in the social sector. You must be able to step back and question the existing reality before you can begin to change it.

My upcoming book ***A More Beautiful Question*** (published by Bloomsbury in 2014) is an in-depth exploration of why questioning is so powerful. And why people who question well are often highly creative, successful, and influential. In the book, I look at the reasons why we start off as great natural questioners when we're kids—but tend to lose this skill as we mature. The book considers and explains some of the ways we can become better questioners throughout our lives. And it looks at how we can use questioning in business, our careers, and as a means of bringing about change in the world around us.

If you've received this e-book, it may mean you're already familiar with the ***A More Beautiful Question*** website (http://www.AMoreBeautifulQuestion.com). Hopefully, you've signed up for the periodic newsletter. Maybe you've even joined the collaborative team that's helping me work on the book. In any case, I'm asking here for your continued support and help.

How can you help? Keep checking in at the AMBQ site, to see what's new. Contribute a question or a comment every now and then. And most of all, spread the word about all of this —if you know other curious creative thinkers like yourself, let them know about the website and the

AMBQ project. I'd like to build a movement around asking Beautiful Questions —and I'm going to need your help to do that.

Look forward to hearing from you.

http://www.WarrenBerger.com
http://www.AMoreBeautifulQuestion.com

If you'd like to share this free ebook with your followers, a suggested tweet:

Get #freebook with 42 tips for overcoming #creativity blocks by @GlimmerGuy http://bit.ly/StopThinkCreate

That bitly link takes people to the newsletter sign-up page.

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STOP THINK CREATE principles at-a-glance list »
ENDNOTES/Sources list »
AUTHOR BIO »

STOP • THINK• CREATE principles at-a-glance

*42 Things You Must **Stop** Doing Immediately*
*So You Can **Start** to Think More Creatively*

1.

STOP… getting ready to create.
THINK… as if you were born ready.

2.

STOP… reading the news first thing in the morning.
THINK… while your brain is still waking up.

3.

STOP… reacting to everyone else.
THINK… for yourself. And by yourself.

4.

STOP… thinking in the here and now.
THINK… in other worlds and other times.

5.

STOP… trying to force your mind to come up with a new idea.
THINK... about something else for a while.

6.

STOP… rewarding yourself for not thinking.
THINK… of ways to reward yourself for thinking.

7.

STOP… wondering "Where do I begin?"
THINK… about starting at the end, in the middle, or anywhere else.

8.

STOP... worrying that you don't have enough expertise.
THINK … with a "beginner's mind."

9.

STOP…trying to map out every step of the journey.
THINK… about the beauty of getting lost.

10.

STOP… making sense.
THINK… of ideas that are illogical, irrational, and impossible.

11.

STOP… doing things the "right" way.
THINK… about how you might do things "wrong."

12.

STOP… saying "It is what it is."
THINK… about how it could be.

13.

STOP… trying to avoid problems.
THINK… of a problem as something to seek out.

14.

STOP… solving the wrong problem.
THINK… about the problem beneath the problem.

15.

STOP… looking at the world only through your eyes.
THINK… of ways to see through the eyes of others.

16.

STOP… consorting with likeminded people.
THINK… alongside people who think differently than you do.

17.

STOP… thinking you must solve the problem now.
THINK… about a problem long enough to allow your mind to sleep on it, chew it over, and turn it every which way.

18.

STOP… trying to invent the wheel.
THINK… of new ways to use a wheel that's already been invented.

19.

STOP… separating apples and oranges.
THINK… of the world of ideas as one big mash-up.

20.

STOP… looking at the world with an "either/or" mindset.
THINK… with an "opposable mind."

21.

STOP… digging for ideas in your own yard.
THINK… about bringing your shovel to the yard next door. (Or three doors down).

22.

STOP… acting as if you've "been there, done that."
THINK… of the familiar as something new and strange.

23.

STOP…trying to remove all doubt.
THINK… of ambiguity as your "fuzzy friend."

24.

STOP… talking about your big ideas.
THINK… of ways to give form to those ideas.

25.

STOP…thinking with your mind alone.
THINK… with your hands.

26.

STOP… thinking in words only.
THINK… in images.

27.

STOP… trying to hide and protect your ideas.
THINK… of ideas as basically worthless until they've been shared with the world.

28.

STOP… throwing away what's broken.
THINK… of ways to capture your mistakes and learn from them.

29.

STOP… letting ideas fly away.
THINK… of ways to capture those ideas.

30.

STOP… asking yourself whether you "can" or "should."
THINK… of how you "might."

31.

STOP… fixating on the first good idea you come up with.
THINK… of many ideas before settling on one.

32.

STOP… jumping to the next new idea (and the next, and the next)
THINK… of ways to keep your "old" ideaa moving forward.

33.

STOP… getting stopped.
THINK… of "next steps" to be taken.

34.

STOP… fretting about your lack of resources.
THINK… of constraints and limitations as guideposts.

35.

STOP… trying to add "more" to your idea.
THINK… of ways to strengthen by subtraction.

36.

STOP… trying to make it perfect.
THINK… of how to get it done and ship it out.

37.

STOP…thinking about what's on your daily to-do list.
THINK… about what's on your lifetime to-do list.

38.

STOP… thinking how much work is required to do something original and amazing.
THINK… how much fun is involved.

39.

STOP… watching the clock.
THINK… so deeply that you lose track of time.

40.

STOP… trying to avoid failure.
THINK… of failure as a critical step on the journey to innovation.

41.

STOP… doing good work.
THINK… beyond good.

42.

STOP… trying to have all the answers.
THINK... more about the questions.

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ENDNOTES

(Number in parentheses refer to the number of the principle)

Bruce Mau (quoted in principles 1, 7, 9), was interviewed for my book *Glimmer* (Penguin Press, 2009). Mau's "Incomplete Manifesto for Growth," available at http://www.brucemaudesign.com, includes the Cage-inspired principle "Begin Anywhere."

Dorothea Brande (2) is quoted from her classic book *Becoming a Writer* (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1934).

Daniel Pink (2) is quoted from his book *Drive* (Riverhead Books, 2009).

Stefan Sagmeister (3, 10, 19) was interviewed for *Glimmer*.

John Cleese (3, 17) is quoted on "tortoise enclosure" from a presentation before a Flemish audience, available on a YouTube video titled "John Cleese WCF." Cleese's quote about deferring decisions is from Fast Company's "4 Lessons in Creativity From John Cleese."

Dr. Scott Barry Kaufman (4) is quoted from Susan Hodara's interview with him in *Communication Arts* Photography Annual 2012.

Edward Glassman (5) is quoted from his interview with Vern Burkhardt in *IdeaConnection* newsletter, 10/31/2010.

George Lois (5, 21) interviewed by me multiple times for *Glimmer* and Creativity magazine; his quote about museums appears in his book, *Damn Good Advice* (Phaidon Press, 2012).

Charles Duhigg (6) is quoted from his book *The Power of Habit* (Random House, 2012).

Paula Scher (8) was interviewed for *Glimmer*.

Steve Jobs (8) and his embrace of "beginner's mind" is discussed in my article "What Zen Taught Silicon Valley (and Steve Jobs) About Innovation," in *Fast Company* Co.Design site, 4/9/2012.

Peter Diamandis (10), is quoted from his website article "Peter's Laws: The Creed of the Persistent and Passionate Mind." (http://www.diamandis.com)

Luke Williams, (10) quoted from my interview with him for the *Fast Company* piece "Big Innovations Question the Status Quo," FastCo.Design, 3/17/2011.

Tibor Kalman (11) and "thinking wrong' is discussed in "Wrongness in the Walls," *Step Inside Design*, May/June 2006.

John Bielenberg (11, 19) was interviewed for *Glimmer*.

Tom Monahan (11) was interviewed by me for *Glimmer* and numerous times for *Creativity* magazine. I also attended one of Monahan's "180-degree thinking" workshops.

Dean Kamen (12) was interviewed for *Glimmer* and also for the book *Imagine, Design, Create* (Melcher Media, 2011).

Bob Johansen (13) interviewed in my research for the book *Uprising* by Scott Goodson, (McGraw-Hill, 2012).

Eric Ries (14) blogged about the 5 Whys in his post "The Five Whys for Startups," *Harvard Business Review*, 4/30/2010.

Jane Fulton Suri (15) was interviewed for *Glimmer*; see also her book *Thoughtless Acts?* (Chronicle Books, 2007).

Scott Page (16) has written on diversity and creativity in his book *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

Teresa Amabile (16, 17) is quoted from "How to Kill Creativity," *Harvard Business Review*, Sept/Oct 1998. Her quote "soak in a problem" appeared in "The 6 Myths of Creativity," *Fast Company*, 12/1/2004.

Jennifer Morla (18) was interviewed for *Glimmer*.

John Thackara (18) has written about "smart recombinations" in his book *In the Bubble*, (MIT Press, 2005).

Maria Popova (19) is creator of the blog "Brain Pickings" (http://www.brainpickings.org), which features many posts about "combinatorial thinking."

Roger Martin (20) was interviewed for *Glimmer*; see also his book *The Opposable Mind* (Harvard Business School Press, 2007).

Dan Wieden (21) has been interviewed by me multiple times, for *The New York Times Magazine, Creativity* magazine, and *Business 2.0.*

George Carlin (22) mentions "vuja de" in the YouTube video clip of the same title.

Bob Sutton (22, 28) was interviewed for my *Fast Company* piece "What Zen Taught Silicon Valley;" his quote on failure is from his 8/9/2010 post in Harvard Business Review titled "Forgive and Remember;" his quote about *vuja de* is from *Weird Ideas That Work* (Free Press, 2007).

Milton Glaser (23, 26) was interviewed for *Glimmer*. His "keep things fuzzy" quote appeared in Roger Martin's article "The Positive Spiral," Business Week, 2/28/2007.

Diego Rodriguez (24) is quoted from "Diego's Laws," posted on his site Metacool (http://www.metacool.typepad.com).

Tim Brown (25, 30) was interviewed for *Glimmer* and for my article "How Might We," *Harvard Business Review*, 9/17/2012.

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Lee Clow (27, 41) was interviewed by me multiple times, for *Glimmer*, *Creativity* magazine, and *Wired*.

Wired magazine quote about failed experiments (28) is from Jonah Lehrer's article "The Neuroscience of Screwing Up," January 2010.

Michael Michalko (29) is quoted from his book *Thinkertoys* (Ten Speed Press, 1991).

Michael Bierut (29) was interviewed for *Glimmer* and for *One* magazine, Winter 2008.

Min Basadur (30) was interviewed for my article "How Might We," *Harvard Business Review*, 9/17/2012.

Edward DeBono (31) is quoted from his book *Lateral Thinking* (Harper Perennial, 1970).

Scott Belsky (32, 33) is quoted from his book *Making Ideas Happen* (Portfolio, 2010).

Jock Brandis (34) was interviewed for *Glimmer*.

Karim Rashid (34) quoted from his book *Design Your Self* (Harper Collins, 2006).

Yves Behar (34) was interviewed for *Glimmer*.

Seth Godin (34, 36) quoted on constraints from "Embracing Constraints," Seth's Blog, 7/20/2011; on shipping from "Fear of Shipping," Seth's Blog, 7/11/2010.

Matthew E. May (35) interviewed for my *Fast Company* piece "What Zen Taught Silicon Valley;" also, quoted from his book *The Laws of Subtraction* (McGraw-Hill, 2012).

Mark Zuckerberg (36, 40) quoted from "The Hacker Way," his letter to investors in the prospectus for Facebook's initial public offering, published February 2012.

Guy Kawasaki (36) is quoted from his book *Rules for Revolutionaries* (HarperBusiness, 2000).

Dr. Eric Maisel (37) quoted from his book *Brainstorm: Harnessing the Power of Productive Obsessions* (New World Library, 2010) as well as Maisel's interview with *IdeaConnection* newsletter, 12/5/2010.

The marshmallow test (38) was described to me by one of the people who conducted a version of the test, Tom Wujec of Autodesk, while I was working with him on the book *Imagine, Design, Create.*

Joi Ito (38) quoted from his essay on neoteny in his blog, *Joi Ito's Web*, 12/16/2009; the essay also appeared in Seth Godin's ebook, *What Matters Now*.

Mihalhyi Csíkszentmihályi (39) quoted from my interview with him for *Glimmer* and from his book *Flow* (Harper & Row, 1992).

Dean Keith Simonton (40) quoted in Bob Sutton's post "Forgive and Remember" in *Harvard Business Review*, 8/9/2010.

Sir Ken Robinson (41) quoted from his 2006 TED speech.

Richard Saul Wurman (42) was interviewed for *Glimmer* and for my *Fast Company* piece, "The Creator of TED Aims to Reinvent conferences Once Again," 8/8/2011; quoted from his book *Information Anxiety 2* (Que, 2001).

ee cummings (42) excerpted from the introduction to "New Poems," 1938.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Over the past two decades, Warren Berger has interviewed, spent time with, and studied hundreds of the world's leading creative thinkers in the fields of design, advertising, film and television, business innovation, technology, and education. He has endeavored to understand and explain how these creative thinkers approach challenges, ask fundamental questions, solve problems, and create new possibilities.

His reporting and writing about innovation and creativity has appeared in ***Wired*** magazine (where he served as a longtime contributing editor) ***The New York Times, Fast Company,*** and ***Harvard Business Review***. His work has also been featured in ***Esquire, GQ, Psychology Today, The L.A. Times, Reader's Digest,*** and ***New York*** magazine. His writing for *Wired* was featured in the anthology book ***Best Business Stories of the Year***, published by Random House.

Berger is the author of the international best-selling book ***Glimmer*** (The Penguin Press), which *Business Week* named one of the "Best Innovation & Design Books of 2009."

His next book is ***A More Beautiful Question***, to be published by Bloomsbury in 2014. He is the creator of the blog by that same name, AMoreBeautifulQuestion.com, which looks at the power of questioning to spark innovation and bring about change in the world around us.

Berger writes about complex subjects like creative thinking and innovation in a manner that is accessible to a wide range of readers (to quote *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* in its review of *Glimmer*, "Like Malcolm Gladwell, Warren Berger writes engagingly about expertise for a general audience.").

Berger has appeared on NBC's *Today Show*, ABC World News, many times on CNN, as a featured guest on Kurt Andersen's *Studio 360*, and has been a repeat guest and a frequently-used expert source on NPR's *All Things Considered*.

He is also the co-founder, along with authors Ben Cheever, Kate Buford, Marilyn Johnson, and others, of **The Marmaduke Writing Factory**, a Westchester, NY–based authors collective that was featured in *The New York Times*.

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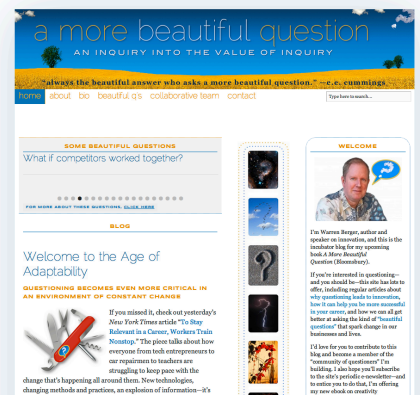

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