

IGNORE EVERYBODY

And 39 Other Keys to Creativity

Hugh MacLeod

PORTFOLIO

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IGNORE EVERYBODY

And 39 Other Keys to Creativity

Hugh MacLeod

PORTFOLIO

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This book is dedicated to my nephews and nieces—
lots of love from Uncle Hugh!



I don't
have Friends.
I have
New York.

Preface

WHEN I FIRST LIVED IN MANHATTAN IN DECEMBER 1997, I got into the habit of doodling on the backs of business cards, just to give me something to do while sitting at the bar. The habit stuck.

All I had when I first got to New York were two suitcases, a couple of cardboard boxes full of stuff, a reservation at the YMCA, and a ten-day freelance copywriting gig at a Midtown advertising agency.

My life for the next couple of weeks was going to work, walking around the city, and staggering back to the YMCA once the bars closed. Lots of alcohol and coffee shops. Lots of weird people. Being hit five times a day by this strange desire to laugh, sing, and cry simultaneously. At times like these there's a lot to be said for an art form that fits easily inside your coat pocket.

The freelance gig turned into a permanent job, and I stayed in town for the next two years. The first month in New York for a newcomer has this certain amazing magic about it that is indescribable. Incandescent lucidity. However long you stay in New York, you pretty much spend the rest of your time there trying to recapture that feeling. Chasing the Manhattan Dragon. Somehow the little drawings on the backs of business cards managed to capture this—the intensity, the fleeting nature of the everlasting song of New York.

This has been my predominant cartoon format for over ten years. The originals are drawn on either business cards, or bristol board cut to the same size, i.e. 3.5 inches by 2 inches. I use mostly a Rotring 0.3mm Rapidograph pen with jet-black India ink. Occasionally I'll use other things—pencil, watercolor, ballpoint, tablet PC—but not often.

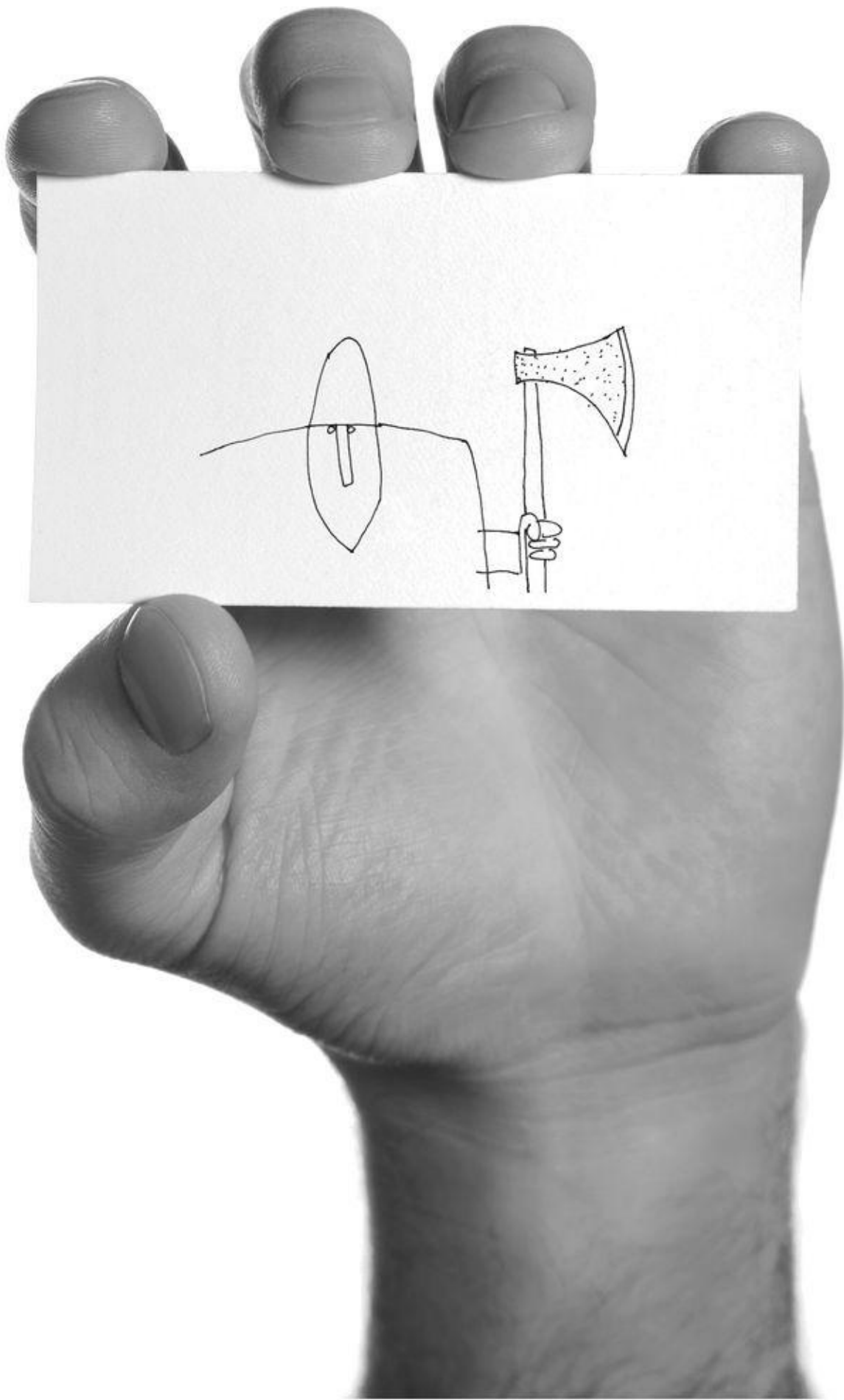
In 2001, then living in the UK, I started a blog, gapingvoid.com, where I began publishing my “business-card cartoons” online. In 2004 I published a series of blog posts that collectively went on to become “How to Be Creative,” which formed the basis of the book you're reading now. In the meantime I've had many adventures, as a cartoonist, a blogger, and a marketer. I now reside in far West Texas, miles away from any big city. To get the whole story of my trials, travels, and, well, life, go check out my blog and give it a read.

“How to Be Creative,” an earlier incarnation of *Ignore Everybody*, has so far been downloaded over a million times. For both creative and commercial reasons, I've made some changes from the original online document—adding more chapters and cartoons to it, and replacing certain potty-mouth words with something more palatable. But part of the deal I made with the publisher going into this project was that I was totally unwilling to alter the spirit of the original blog posts just to see the book appear in print. Happily, they wanted it to remain pretty much as is, within reason. For that I remain very grateful to them.

I can't decide what I want to be: A millionaire OR an Artist.

Can't you just compromise? Become a millionaire artist OR something....







He came to
the Big City
in order to get
his Life together.
His Life had
other plans

1. Ignore everybody.

The more original your idea is, the less good advice other people will be able to give you. When I first started with the cartoon-on-back-of-bizcard format, people thought I was nuts. Why wasn't I trying to do something that was easier for markets to digest, like cutie-pie greeting cards or whatever?

YOU DON'T KNOW IF YOUR IDEA IS ANY GOOD the moment it's created. Neither do anyone else. The most you can hope for is a strong gut feeling that it is. And trusting your feelings is not as easy as the optimists say it is. There's a reason why feelings scare us—because what they tell us and what the rest of the world tells us are often two different things.

And asking close friends never works quite as well as you hope, either. It's not that they deliberately want to be unhelpful. It's just that they don't know your world one millionth as well as you know your world, no matter how hard they try, no matter how hard you try to explain.

Plus a big idea will change you. Your friends may love you, but they may not want you to change. If you change, then their dynamic with you also changes. They might prefer things the way they are, and that's how they love you—the way you are, not the way you may become.

Ergo, they might not have any incentive to see you change. If so, they will be resistant to anything that catalyzes it. That's human nature. And you would do the same, if the shoe were on the other foot.

With business colleagues it's even worse. They're used to dealing with you in a certain way. They're used to having a certain level of control over the relationship. And they want whatever makes them more prosperous. Sure, they might prefer it if you prosper as well, but that's not their top priority.

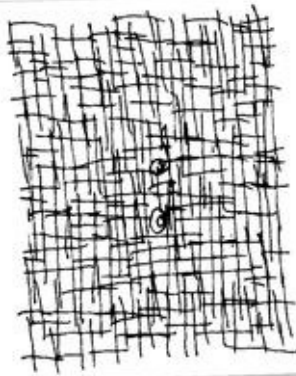
If your idea is so good that it changes your dynamic enough to where you need them less or, God forbid, the market needs them less, then they're going to resist your idea every chance they can.

Again, that's human nature.

GOOD IDEAS ALTER THE POWER BALANCE IN RELATIONSHIPS. THAT IS WHY GOOD IDEAS ARE ALWAYS INITIALLY RESISTED.

Good ideas come with a heavy burden, which is why so few people execute them. So few people can handle it.





They were a
glamorous looking
crowd. Then they
opened their
fucking mouths

2. The idea doesn't have to be big. It just has to be yours.

The sovereignty you have over your work will inspire far more people than the actual content ever will.

WE ALL SPEND A LOT OF TIME BEING IMPRESSED by folks we've never met. Somebody featured in the media who's got a big company, a big product, a big movie, a big bestseller. Whatever.

And we spend even more time trying unsuccessfully to keep up with them. Trying to start up our own companies, our own products, our own film projects, books, and whatnot.

I'm as guilty as anyone. I tried lots of different things over the years, trying desperately to pry my career out of the jaws of mediocrity. Some to do with business, some to do with art, etc.

One evening, after one false start too many, I just gave up. Sitting at a bar, feeling a bit burned out by work and by life in general, I just started drawing on the backs of business cards for no reason. I didn't really need a reason. I just did it because it was there, because it amused me in a kind of random, arbitrary way.

Of course it was stupid. Of course it was not commercial. Of course it wasn't going to go anywhere. Of course it was a complete and utter waste of time. But in retrospect, it was this built-in futility that gave it its edge. Because it was the exact opposite of all the "Big Plans" my peers and I were used to making. It was so liberating not to have to think about all that, for a change.

It was so liberating to be doing something that didn't have to have some sort of commercial angle for a change.

It was so liberating to be doing something that didn't have to impress anybody, for a change.

It was so liberating to be free of ambition, for a change.

It was so liberating to be doing something that wasn't a career move, for a change.

It was so liberating to have something that belonged just to me and no one else, for a change.

It was so liberating to feel complete sovereignty, for a change. To feel complete freedom, for a change. To have something that didn't require somebody else's money, or somebody else's approval for a change.

And of course, it was then, and only then, that the outside world started paying attention.

The sovereignty you have over your work will inspire far more people than the actual content ever will. How your own sovereignty inspires other people to find their own sovereignty, their own sense of freedom and possibility, will give the work far more power than the work's objective merits ever will.

Your idea doesn't have to be big. It just has to be yours alone. The more the idea is yours alone, the more freedom you have to do something really amazing.

The more amazing, the more people will click with your idea. The more people click with your idea, the more this little thing of yours will snowball into a big thing.

That's what doodling on the backs of business cards taught me.



The price of being a
Sheep is BOREDOM.
The price of being a
Wolf is LONELINESS.
Choose one or the
other with great CARE.

Please go to
bed with me 2.0

chugh

3. Put the hours in.

Doing anything worthwhile takes forever. Ninety percent of what separates successful people and failed people is time, effort, and stamina.

I GET ASKED A LOT, “YOUR BUSINESS CARD FORMAT is very simple. Aren’t you worried about somebody ripping it off?”

Standard Answer: Only if they can draw more of them than me, better than me.

What gives the work its edge is the simple fact that I’ve spent years drawing them. I’ve drawn thousands. Tens of thousands of man-hours.

So if somebody wants to rip my idea off, go ahead. If somebody wants to overtake me in the Business Card Doodle Wars, go ahead. You’ve got many long years in front of you. And unlike me you won’t be doing it for the joy of it. You’ll be doing it for some self-loathing, ill-informed, lame-a-mercenary reason. So the years will be even longer and far, far more painful. Lucky you.

If somebody in your industry is more successful than you, it’s probably because he works harder than you do. Sure, maybe he’s more inherently talented, more adept at networking, but I don’t consider that an excuse. Over time, that advantage counts for less and less. Which is why the world is full of highly talented, network-savvy, failed mediocrities.

So yeah, success means you’ve got a long road ahead of you, regardless. How do you best manage it?

Well, as I’m fond of saying on my blog, don’t quit your day job. I didn’t. I rent an office and go there every day, the same as any other regular schmoe. When I was younger and had to remind myself that there was a world outside of my head, I drew mostly while sitting at a bar in the evenings, but then I got old. Even after my cartooning got successful, I still took on corporate marketing and advertising gigs, just to stay attached to the real world.

Keeping one foot in the “real world” makes everything far more manageable for me. The fact that I have another income means I don’t feel pressured to do something market-friendly. Instead, I get to do whatever the hell I want. I get to do it for my own satisfaction. And I think that makes the work more powerful in the long run. It also makes it easier to carry on with it in a calm fashion, day-in-day-out, and not go crazy in insane creative bursts brought on by money worries.

The day job, which I really like, gives me something productive and interesting to do among fellow adults. It gets me out of the house in the daytime. If I were a professional cartoonist I’d just be chained to a drawing table at home all day, scribbling out a living in silence, interrupted only by frequent trips to the coffee shop. No, thank you.

Simply put, my method allows me to pace myself over the long haul, which is critical.

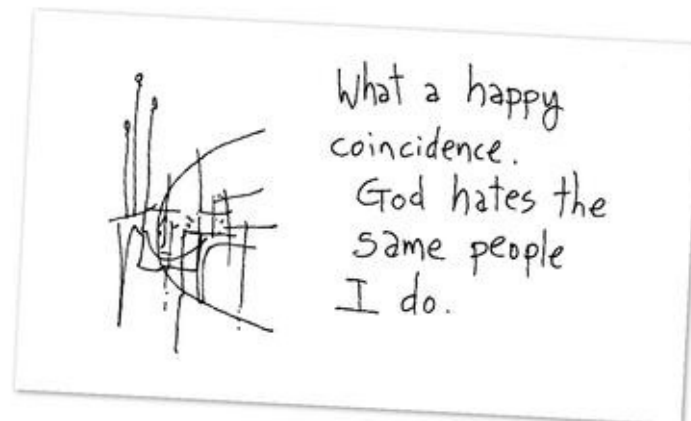
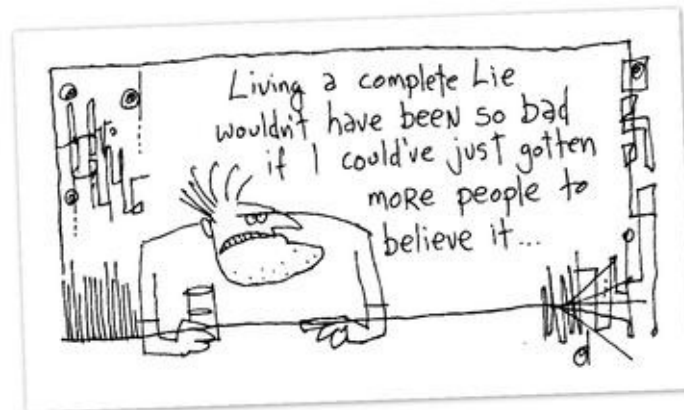
Stamina is utterly important. And stamina is only possible if it’s managed well. People think all they need to do is endure one crazy, intense, job-free creative burst and their dreams will come true. They are wrong, they are stupidly wrong.

Being good at anything is like figure skating—the definition of being good at it is being able to make it look easy. But it never is easy. Ever. That’s what the stupidly wrong people conveniently forget.

If I were just starting out writing, say, a novel or a screenplay, or maybe starting up a new software company or an online retail business, I wouldn’t try to quit my job in order to make this big, dramatic heroic-quest thing about it.

I would do something far simpler: I would find that extra hour or two in the day that belongs nobody else but me, and I would make it productive. Put the hours in, do it for long enough, and magical, life-transforming things happen eventually. Sure, that means less time watching TV, Internet surfing, going out to dinner, or whatever.

But who cares?



4. Good ideas have lonely childhoods.

This is the price you pay, every time.
There is no way of avoiding it.

THIS CHAPTER IS AS MUCH ABOUT BUSINESS as it is about “creativity.” Then again, the two are rarely separate.

When I say, “Ignore Everybody,” I don’t mean, Ignore all people, at all times, forever. No, other people’s feedback plays a very important role. Of course it does. It’s more like, the better the idea, the more “out there” it initially will seem to other people, even people you like and respect. So there’ll be a time in the beginning when you have to press on, alone, without one tenth the support you probably need. This is normal. This is to be expected. Ten years after I started doing them, drawing my “cartoons on the back of business cards” seems like a no-brainer, in terms of what it has brought me both emotionally and to my career. But I can also clearly remember when I first started drawing them—the default reaction when I started to show my work on the back of business cards was a lot of head scratching. Sure, a few people thought they were kinda interesting and whatnot, but even to my closest friends, they seemed a complete, non-commercial exercise in futility for the New York world I was currently living in. Happily, time proved otherwise.

And again, from our first lesson, let’s not forget: **GOOD IDEAS ALTER THE POWER BALANCE IN RELATIONSHIPS. THAT IS WHY GOOD IDEAS ARE ALWAYS INITIALLY RESISTED.** The good news is, creating an idea or brand that fights the Powers That Be can be a lot of fun, and very rewarding. The bad news is, they’re called the Powers That Be for a reason—they’re the ones calling the shots, they have the power. Which is why the problem of selling a new idea to the general public can sometimes be a piece of cake, compared to selling a new idea internally to your team. This is to be expected: having your boss or biggest client not like your idea and fire you hits one at a much more immediate and primal level than having some abstract housewife in rural Kansas hypothetically not liking your idea after randomly seeing it advertised somewhere. Which is why most team members in any industry are far more concerned with the power relationships inside their immediate professional circle than with what may actually be interesting and useful for the customer.

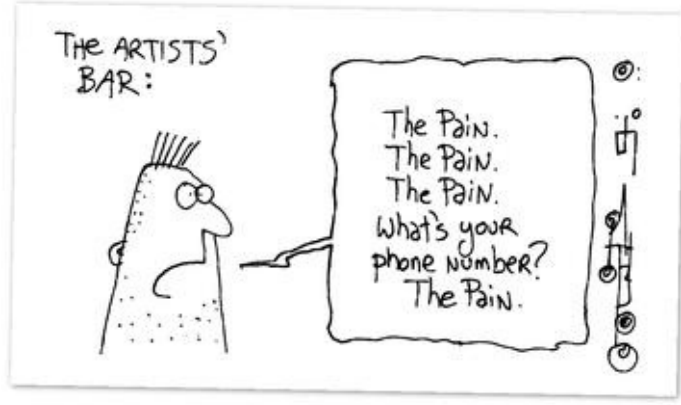
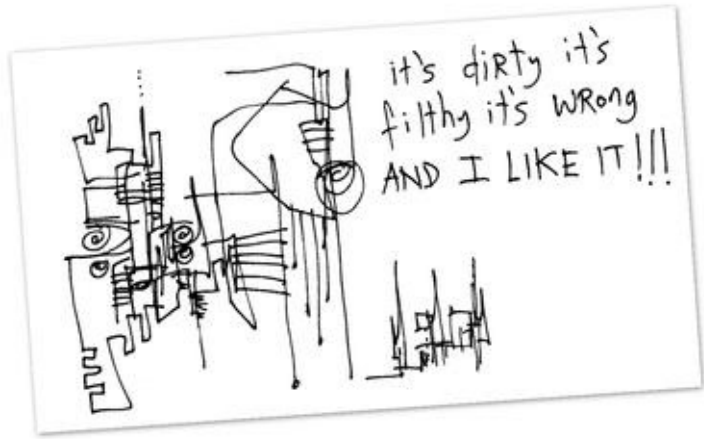
And of course, once your idea starts outgrowing its “lonely childhood,” you might have a new problem to contend with. I refer to it as the “I want to be part of something! Oh, wait, no I don’t” syndrome.

I’ve seen this before so many times, both firsthand and with other people. Your idea finally seems to be working, seems to be getting all sorts of traction, and all of a sudden you’ve got all these swarms of people trying to join the team, trying to get a piece of the action.

And then as soon as they get a foothold inside the inner circle, you soon realize they never really understood your idea in the first place, they just want to be on the winning team. And the weirdest part is, they don’t seem to mind sabotaging your original idea that got them interested in the first place, in order to maintain their newfound social status. It’s probably the most bizarre bit of human behavior I’ve ever witnessed firsthand in business, and it’s amazingly common.

Again, this is to be expected. Good ideas don’t exist in a vacuum. Good ideas exist in a social context. And not everybody has the same agenda as you.

Good ideas can have lonely young adulthoods, too.



5. If your business plan depends on suddenly being “discovered” by some big shot, your plan will probably fail.

Nobody suddenly discovers anything. Things are made slowly and in pain.

I WAS OFFERED A QUITE SUBSTANTIAL PUBLISHING deal a few years ago. Turned it down. The company sent me a contract. I looked it over. Hmmmm . . .

Called the company back. Asked for some clarifications on some points in the contract. Never heard back from them. The deal died.

This was a very respected company. You may have even heard of it.

They just assumed I must be like all the other people they represent—hungry and desperate and willing to sign anything.

They wanted to own me, regardless of how good or bad a job they might do of helping me make my dream a reality.

That’s the thing about some big publishers. They want 110 percent from you, but they don’t offer to do likewise in return. To them, the artist is just one more noodle in a big bowl of pasta.

Their business model is basically to throw all the pasta against the wall, and see which noodle sticks. The ones that fall to the floor are just forgotten.

Publishers are just middlemen. That’s all. If artists could remember that more often, they’d save themselves a lot of aggravation.

Not that good publishers don’t exist. The groovy cats publishing this book, for example, are lovely people. But by the time we found each other, I didn’t need them. I was already busy writing my blog, drawing, and doing other stuff. I already had a sizable audience, a creative outlet, and a good income stream. Though it is nice to see my name in print, it wasn’t something I was dreaming about. I didn’t see it as a ticket to something.

Thanks to the Internet, you can now build your own thing without having somebody else “discovering” you first. Which means when the big boys come along offering you deals, you’ll be in a much better position to get exactly what you want from the equation. Big offers are a good thing, but personal sovereignty matters a whole lot more over the long run.



Too bad the characters in
the movie "Sideways" are
only Fictional, because if they
were real we could find
them and kill them Yay!

ehsh

6. You are responsible for your own experience.

Nobody can tell you if what you're doing is good, meaningful, or worthwhile. The more compelling the path, the more lonely it is.

EVERY CREATIVE PERSON IS LOOKING FOR "THE Big Idea." You know, the one that's going to catapult him or her out of the murky depths of obscurity and onto the highest planes of cultural rock stardom.

The one that's all love-at-first-sight with the Zeitgeist.

The one that's going to get them invited to all the right parties, metaphorical or otherwise.

So naturally you ask yourself, if and when you finally come up with The Big Idea, after years of toil, struggle, and doubt, how do you know whether or not it is "The One"?

Answer: You don't.

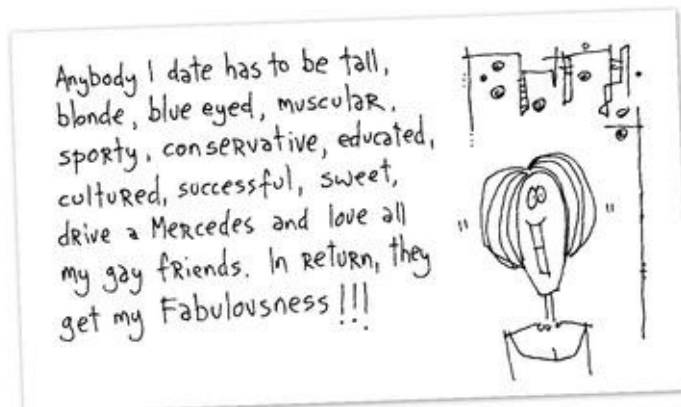
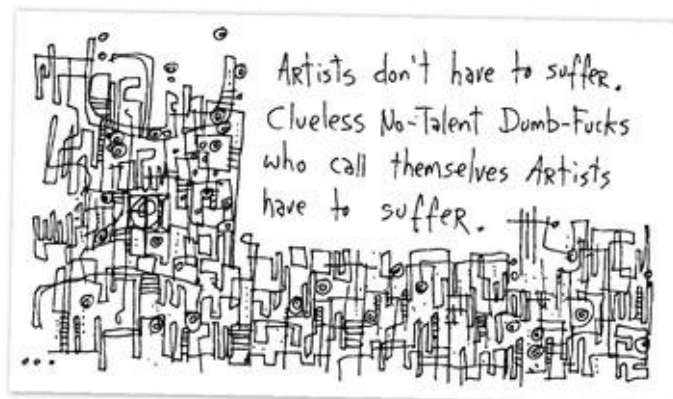
There's no glorious swelling of existential triumph.

That's not what happens.

All you get is this rather quiet, kvetchy voice inside you that seems to say, "This is totally stupid. This is utterly moronic. This is a complete waste of time. I'm going to do it anyway."

And you go do it anyway.

Second-rate ideas like glorious swellings far more. Second-rate ideas like it when the creator starts believing his own heroic-myth crap. "Me! The Artist! Me! The Bringer of Light! Me! The Creator! Me! The Undiscovered Genius!!!" It keeps the second-rate idea alive longer.



7. ~~Everyone is born creative; everyone is given a box of crayons in kindergarten.~~

Then when you hit puberty they take the crayons away and replace them with dry, uninspiring books on algebra, history, etc. Being suddenly hit years later with the “creative bug” is just a wee voice telling you, “I’d like my crayons back, please.”

SO YOU’VE GOT THE ITCH TO DO SOMETHING. Write a screenplay, start a painting, write a book, turn your recipe for fudge brownies into a proper business, build a better mousetrap, whatever. You don’t know where the itch came from, it’s almost like it just arrived on your doorstep, uninvited. Until now you were quite happy holding down a real job, being a regular person . . .

Until now.

You don’t know if you’re any good or not, but you think you could be. And the idea terrifies you. The problem is, even if you are good, you know nothing about this kind of business. You don’t know any publishers or agents or venture capitalists or any of these fancy-shmancy kind of folk. You have a friend who’s got a cousin in California who’s into this kind of stuff, but you haven’t talked to your friend for over two years . . .

Besides, if you write a book, what if you can’t find a publisher? If you invent a new piece of world-changing software, what if you can’t find a financial backer? If you write a screenplay, what if you can’t find a producer? And what if the producer turns out to be a crook? You’ve always worked hard your whole life, you’ll be damned if you’ll put all that effort into something if there ain’t no pot of gold at the end of this dumb-ass rainbow . . .

Heh. That’s not your wee voice asking for the crayons back. That’s your other voice, your adult voice, your boring and tedious voice trying to find a way to get the wee crayon voice to shut the hell up.

Your wee voice doesn’t want you to sell something. Your wee voice wants you to make something. There’s a big difference. Your wee voice doesn’t give a damn about publishers, venture capitalists, or Hollywood producers.

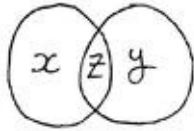
Go ahead and make something. Make something really special. Make something amazing that will really blow the mind of anybody who sees it.

If you try to make something just to fit your uninformed view of some hypothetical market, you will fail. If you make something special and powerful and honest and true, you will succeed.

The wee voice didn’t show up because it decided you need more money, or you need to hang out with movie stars. Your wee voice came back because your soul somehow depends on it. There’s something you haven’t said, something you haven’t done, some light that needs to be switched on, and it needs to be taken care of. Now.

So you have to listen to the wee voice or it will die . . . taking a big chunk of you along with it. They’re only crayons. You didn’t fear them in kindergarten, why fear them now?

Silicon Valley Explained:



x: his lies.
y: her drinking.
z: our amusement.

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