

This very hack would probably not exist were it not for Ron's mistake on NPR; after the show, he thought about the Latin phrase *felix culpa* or "happy fault," which occurs in various forms throughout *Finnegans Wake*, one of his favorite books. He was spurred to develop this hack.

Notes

1. Alina Tugend, *Better by Mistake: The Unexpected Benefits of Being Wrong* (New York: Riverhead, 2011). A pretty good book on how to learn from mistakes, including actual examples of the medical checklists mentioned in Hack 1, "Remember to Remember."

Hack 34: Don't Know What You're Doing

Regain your creative spark and your artistic voice by letting go of control, silencing inner critics, and focusing on process rather than product.

Humans create as naturally as breathing. People throughout time and in all places draw, tell stories, and perform plays and rituals. Small children do it without instruction or thinking about it, instinctively, but somehow we lose the ability to do this without fear. As we grow older, we're taught that it's proper to spend our time working, or at least being "productive," and that creativity is only productive if you make something useful, exceptional, or otherwise objectively valuable.

Many creative projects die before being born because the uncertainty of a clean page is so frightening. Thinking about whether you have any talent, how to make something people will like, what it should look or sound like, and why you have any right to "waste" time and materials is a certain way to never actually create anything.

To move forward, you must learn to tolerate, and even enjoy, not really knowing what you're doing or going to do, and to be willing to let the process take you for a ride. You have to focus on the motion and action, rather than the resulting object. You have to understand that your creativity isn't wholly in your control, that it's a function of yourself and the world, and your relationship with the world. You have to further understand that you don't go through the process of making art to come out with a "good product" at the end, but for the fun and transcendental experience itself. What you actually make is a postcard you send yourself from the road.

This is true of any creative pursuit. You can create as you move through the world, going back to doing it as naturally as breathing — that’s the origin of the word “inspiration,” after all — by giving yourself space and time, and being in that space and time. Lynda Barry describes it this way in her book *What It Is* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2008):

What do drawing, singing, dancing, music making, handwriting, story writing, acting, remembering, and even dreaming all have in common? They come about when a certain person in a certain place in a certain time arranges certain uncertainties into certain form. The time for it is always with us, though we say, “I do not have that kind of time. The kind of time I have is not for this, but for that. I wish I had that kind of time.” But if you had that kind of time — would you do it? Would you give it a try? A kind of doing both takes and gives time — makes live the dead hours inside us.

In Action

The creativity exercises in this hack are meant to help you with a few tasks. One is to help you recognize what’s stopping you from creating, so that you can effectively fight it. Another is to help you learn how to think about making art as a process instead of a means to the end of creating an object, and to get out of your own way. There are many, many other paths to these ends; these are only a few to set you on the road.

The Inner Critic

Before you move into the creative activities, it’s helpful to learn about things that often stop you. One of the most powerful is the inner critic, the embodiment of an emotional force that inhibits you from creating. Most of us have multiple inner critics who wheedle, heckle, browbeat, and discourage us, from a vantage point inside our heads. Some might resemble a disapproving professor who doesn’t think you’re smart enough, or a parent who doesn’t want to clean up your mess, or an arts columnist who thinks your work is trite and derivative. Sometimes inner critics can even seem friendly at a first glance, such as an aunt who thinks you’d be happier spending time with your kids, or a coach who exhorts you to be strong and ignore your emotional life in favor of getting “real” work done.

Your inner critics defend the status quo; they don’t know anything about art or creativity, but they know that creating is upsetting and they want you to stop doing it. The inner critic will compare your representation to consensus reality and judge its “accuracy.” What it doesn’t understand is that art is not about accuracy or representation, but about filtering; it’s your individual viewpoint that gives life to your art and makes it unique in the world, but your inner critics

want to make you shut up and conform. The inner critic has a lot of investment in shutting you down, it's heartless, and because it lives in your head, it knows how to manipulate your emotions very well. No wonder it can scare you into never letting your real self out.

One of the primary ways to start disarming inner critics is to know the enemy. Draw your inner critics and write descriptions of them. Don't think too hard about this or try to be clever; capture whatever comes to mind and think about it later. Make a WANTED poster and a rap sheet. You usually have more than one inner critic, so draw them all. You need to know these voices and faces so you can recognize them the next time they come after you. Once you know who they are, practice telling them off.

Usually there are points in time and particular experiences when inner critics arise and form. You can help weaken their hold by understanding where they came from. Here's a possible map to points you may not recall consciously: Draw some simple things, an apple, a dog, a car. Then, look at the drawings as if someone else did them, and try to determine how old the artist might be. You may need help from someone else to be objective about this, so ask a friend who doesn't know you drew them. That age may reflect an experience when something froze in you artistically; use it as a clue to think what that experience might have been.

Keep Moving

Creativity is motion. When we spend too much time planning, evaluating, editing, and judging before we've even done anything, we've frozen, and it's hard to move again. We become focused on planning and executing the perfect sequence of actions that will produce a good, or at least acceptable, result on the first try. Successful artists and writers know, however, that drafts are key. The way to make something great is to produce and produce, then choose and edit later. Many people learned this in school writing papers (although many of us who were decent writers were lazy and still only produced one draft); others have learned how to do this since the advent of digital cameras, which make it easy for us to shoot 20 pictures of something and then select the best one.

Our writer friend Jay believes that everyone must write "a thousand pages of crap" before producing something that works, so the faster you produce those pages, the sooner you start doing things you like better. Realize that not everything you make must matter, and that making stuff that doesn't matter is also part of the process. If you have an idea for a story, write the same story five times; if you write about a memory, try writing it from five different viewpoints or interpretations. If you draw or paint, keep adding and fill up your paper to the edges. Start over and fill up another page or two. Doing works of small scope

can help you warm up to this. Write haiku or nanofiction (stories of exactly 55 words); make quick sketches and abstract shapes.

Once you've made a lot of stuff, you can start choosing and focusing, and even recombining. Pick your favorites, or favorite parts. Maybe it seems clear that the start of one story actually works better with the end of another. Reshape a painting, cutting the canvas or paper into a different shape to focus on a part you like or cutting away something that doesn't add to the whole. You can even start drawing and painting on it again, glue other pieces to it, or glue it to another painting.

Don't be afraid to "waste" resources, whether that means time or supplies. If it makes you feel better, use inexpensive supplies meant for kids: newsprint, tempera and watercolor paint, chalk, crayons. Think about how much you might spend on going to the movies (considering tickets, refreshments, and so on), and then spend an evening with the supplies you bought with the same money. If you like to build sculptures, use objects from your recycle bin. Don't be afraid to spend a little to let your mind and hands consume creative "food" any more than you'd worry about giving your body a snack or a good meal. Experiment to see what kind of line you like to make; some people like pens, others pencils, crayon, brushes with ink, brushes with paint — find what feels good and makes you excited when you use it.

Practice keeping your hands and pen (crayon, pencil, brush, or whatever) moving. Lynda Barry suggests setting a timer for five or ten minutes and seeing if you can keep from stopping while you fill paper with writing and drawing, alternating if necessary. If you get stuck, draw spirals or shapes, or write the alphabet, as long as you keep moving. If you'd rather write, try "freewriting" for a set period of time, simply writing words down continuously, whether they're story, nonsense, or a stream of your thoughts at the moment, anything. To remember how to draw in motion the way kids do, illustrate a story as someone reads it to you. Don't try to capture scenes in the story; draw the action and keep changing the same drawing so that it evolves as the story progresses.

Let Go of Control

If you think you can't draw without thinking it through first, remember the drawing we call doodling. Everyone submits to the urge to draw freely in certain circumstances, but we dismiss this by calling it a silly name and saying it doesn't count. Doodling happens when your mind is elsewhere and your body is stuck in a place, such as a meeting or waiting on hold on the phone. It's mindless, aimless, motion-based, and all your own. I'll bet you know in the back of your mind that you return to the same shapes and patterns every time you have a chance to doodle. This is the last bastion of the free drawing inside you.

Try making doodle-type drawing meaningful. Get together with a friend and try to have a conversation via doodling. Take a pencil and start by drawing a shape on a piece of paper. Then give the pencil to your friend so that he or she can respond. Trade the pencil back and forth, altering the shapes, adding new ones, and seeing if you can understand without actually talking. When you both think you're done, you can discuss it if you want. What were you talking about? Is it an argument? Is it a story? If so, then try to write the story in words.

Understand that you don't have to constantly judge and control to create. Gather up some paper and paint, crayons, or whatever you enjoy, put on some music that you find interesting, then blindfold yourself and start painting. You might feel silly, but don't pay attention to the inner critic that's telling you it's silly. You might make a little mess, but don't listen to the inner critic telling you that you're not allowed — you're a grown-up and can clean up after yourself. Paint and draw blind for the space of a song, and then see what happened, what was sent through you onto the paper. Try it again, and again.

Collage is a great form for intuitive creation. Start with one of your blind-painted pieces and start adding to it. Alternatively, page through old magazines quickly and cut out images and words that catch your attention. Layer pieces, paint around and over them, emphasize and alter images with chalk or crayons. If something just seems like it needs some red, put some red on there. Keep going and don't try too hard to "make it look good." If you're more interested in writing, use the random words and images you found to write a story. Pick three words and one picture and go. Is the picture what you see? Who are you in that scene? What don't you see that might be behind you or to the side? Try using the same words and pictures to write a romantic story, a murder mystery, an alternative history, a science fiction story.

Get out of your own way and watch what happens. Don't be afraid to love what you make, although an inner critic may tell you that it's egotistical to do that. When you see that you aren't the maker, but the transmitter, of art — when you understand that when you create, you form a channel for the world to pass through, filtered by who and where you are in the moment — you'll be able to see that it's okay to enjoy that ride and appreciate the results.

Moments of shock in your life cause natural motion and disorientation, and they often renew your vision. If you move to a new location, change your relationship, have children, or undergo some other major life change, it changes how you see the world and shakes up a lot of your old, set patterns of relating to it. This can be a great source of fresh insight, so use it!

Artistic Kin

What visual art sings to you? Do you have an author who amazes you by expressing just what you'd say and how you'd say it, "if only you could write"? These artists are your "artistic kin." You recognize, even unconsciously, a shared view or aesthetic; what you love in their work is something that resonates with part of you, and that is likely to be part of your authentic work as well.

You can learn about yourself and your voice by studying what your artistic kin do. When you've produced some drawing or writing of your own, start reading or going to museums and checking art books to find work that looks similar to yours in certain ways. Start keeping a collection of stories and passages, or pictures, that evoke an emotional response in you or remind you of something you've made. Compare and identify the similarities, and how their work differs from yours. Note well: The purpose of this is not to mimic other creators or judge the "quality" of your work against theirs. It's to identify what belongs to you and to sharpen your vision of it, by looking at it next to similar work. It is also to help you see yourself in the company of these makers and take support from their virtual fellowship.

How It Works

Drawing comes naturally to children. Translating our experiences and what we see into pictures seems to be a basic human urge. For kids, drawing is an activity unto itself, a sort of do-it-yourself animation, something that happens in the moment as we think and tell stories. There's a direct line from mind to pencil, and we draw suspended in the moment, for the adventure of seeing what happens next or what appears on the paper.

As we get older, we learn that no activity is acceptable unless it's productive. Spending our time "playing" and "using up materials for no good purpose" is no longer supported or encouraged. We learn that working is what we should spend most of our time on, and even our nonwork time should be spent in "productive" pursuits. The focus shifts from doing something for joy or pleasure, or because it's fun and interesting, to the results we get from what we do, and whether it was "worth" spending time and money (in the form of materials) on. We judge the process by judging the product; if we don't find the product "valuable" in some way, the process has been a waste.

This is inimical to true creativity, but the next step is even worse. We start performing a cost-benefit analysis ahead of time, judging that we "have no talent" or skill, thus anything we make won't be very good, so there's no reason to make anything. We edit and critique our imagined project until we convince ourselves that there's no point to making it in the first place. We imagine giving ourselves a little gold star for being so sensible and saving all that wasted time and money! Over time we succeed in cutting ourselves off from those "childish"

activities and the thoughts and feelings that drive them. If we do create, we try to make something good enough to justify the expenditure, but our efforts fall victim to our internalized criticism and reinforce our notion that we might as well not bother. Many of us nonetheless still carry that innate human urge to create, which won't be extinguished, and we find ourselves stuck, unable to know how to move forward, afraid of being foolish and of the critical voices in our heads, disconnected from the driving force of real self-expression, and aching to follow the urge again.

To reconnect with the joy and satisfaction of making art, we have to relearn how to think of it as a process and stop thinking about judging the object that may result from it. A piece of art should be a by-product of the adventure of making it, not the goal. To recapture the adventure that making art should be, you need to become comfortable with not planning out everything you'll do before you start, not knowing what will happen next, not necessarily being "good" at it — with being a little out of control.

In her wonderful graphic essay "Two Questions," Lynda Barry discusses the process of disconnecting from a child's experience of drawing to an adult's mannered fearfulness, and eventually reconnecting. The two questions referred to in the title are "is it good?" and "does it suck?" Learning to ask those questions is how we disconnect from authenticity. When we ask "is it good," we look for approval through making "good" art and follow someone else's standards to please them and get rewards. When we ask "does it suck," we learn to internalize inhibiting criticism and start changing and editing what we do to avoid negative feelings when someone tells us our art is "bad." We try to do only what is "good" and eliminate what is "bad," reacting to outside feedback rather than acting from our own instincts. Through it all, something inside knows that what we're doing is taking us further from ourselves, and that something is wrong, but we may not be able to pinpoint the problem or how to solve it. Only when we let go of solving it, when we can confidently answer "I don't know" to both questions and give ourselves back over to the mystery and free-fall excitement of creating without judgment, do we find our voices again.

This is not to say that there is no value to artistic discernment, or the editorial eye. We don't believe that *everything* made is great art. However, we think that most people exercise too much criticism and put the activities in the wrong order. *Editing should be applied after creativity happens, not before it starts.* To apply it to a potential creative act is to shut that act down and prevent it from happening, or from happening in a way that connects to personal truth. Sapping creative endeavor of personal truth drains it of vitality, authenticity, and originality, and even of the pleasure and enrichment that the creator can get from the act.

Because all of us have a past full of experiences connected to creativity, and because we all have inner critics, many readers will decide ahead of time that these techniques and exercises are silly and that they won't work. Because these

techniques develop intuitive sense and are meant to stimulate action, they aren't easy to convey on a static page of text; conveying what you can expect to experience if you try them is impossible. You can only take the risk and jump, and see what happens to you.

In Real Life

We can't overestimate the influence of our teacher, Vedika Dietrich, on our understanding of these principles. Many of the exercises in this hack are adapted from her classes on intuitive creativity; Ron has taken her course on intuitive writing, and Marty has taken two courses of intuitive visual art with her.

Marty, in particular, found these courses life-changing. She has struggled all her life with the urge to create and the conflicts inherent in trying to do so, damage from inner critics, war with Lynda Barry's two questions, and more. By the time she reached Vedika's class, she had almost completely shut down her creativity. Through working with Vedika, she not only regained some equilibrium and new insight about how she creates and why she doesn't create as much as she'd like, but created art that frankly astonished her. She evaluates art differently when she sees it now, and the act of creating inspires her again, bringing her new insights about herself and the world that carry over into all areas of her life.

See Also

- If you happen to live in the Seattle area, you can take Vedika Dietrich's courses yourself. Visit her website at www.artsurgery.com to find her current course schedule, artistic manifesto, and more.
- Lynda Barry, *What It Is* (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2008) and *Picture This* (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2010). These books contain some of the ideas and techniques from Ms. Barry's course "Writing the Unthinkable," told in a combination of collage, story, autobiography, and suggested exercises. Marty has been a fan of Lynda Barry for decades, and she finds them beautiful, mind-blowing, and unfailingly inspirational.
- Danny Gregory, *The Creative License: Giving Yourself Permission to Be the Artist You Truly Are* (New York: Hyperion, 2006). Another take on how to reconnect with authenticity and pleasure in creativity, with advice and drawing/writing suggestions to follow.
- Dean Nimmer, *Art from Intuition: Overcoming Your Fears and Obstacles to Making Art* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2008). A different set of very practical, step-by-step instructions for following a course of exercises to develop freer, more intuitive art.

- David Bayles and Ted Orland, *Art and Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking* (Santa Cruz, CA: Image Continuum Press, 1993). A classic exploration of the psychology of creative blockage.

Hack 35: Ratchet

The Roman poet Ovid wrote, "Add little to little and there will be a big pile." In many areas of life, from board games to the board of directors, a spectacular "win" is not as important as a steady gain-and-maintain.

In terms of tools such as socket wrenches, ratcheting refers to mechanisms that move in only one direction, usually in a series of small incremental steps. In the sense we'll be using it in this hack, ratcheting refers to accumulating things and accomplishments so that you add to them consistently, even if it's only a little at a time, and avoid depleting them.

Money is an example of something that can go either way. Generally, we both earn and spend money constantly. However, we're taught from childhood that if we start saving some, even a few dollars per week, it will add up to a substantial amount over time if we don't touch it. The trick is to keep putting away that little bit and find ways to keep yourself from spending it.

No one can steal your having written a book or having composed a song from you. Your accomplishments only accumulate. Someone might sue you for the royalties from your song or (as happened to Ron once) even claim to have written your book. However, your accomplishments will remain.

In Action

Here are some ways you can try to ratchet your life toward a gigantic pile of goodness.

Blog

As many writers have realized, if you have anything at all interesting to say, writing frequent blog posts is a great way to develop a body of work and keep your writing fingers limber. It's also a way to attract some attention to your writing, as long as you don't write exclusively about your cat, what you ate for lunch, or how long it has been since you last blogged. Even writing about those things can bring you attention, however, if you do it well and consistently. Over time, if you consistently keep adding to your pile of blog posts, you accumulate work and readership, bit by bit. Many writers have parlayed this into book deals and more.