

KEEP

GOING 

10 WAYS TO STAY CREATIVE IN GOOD TIMES AND BAD

AUSTIN KLEON

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF
**STEAL LIKE AN
ARTIST**

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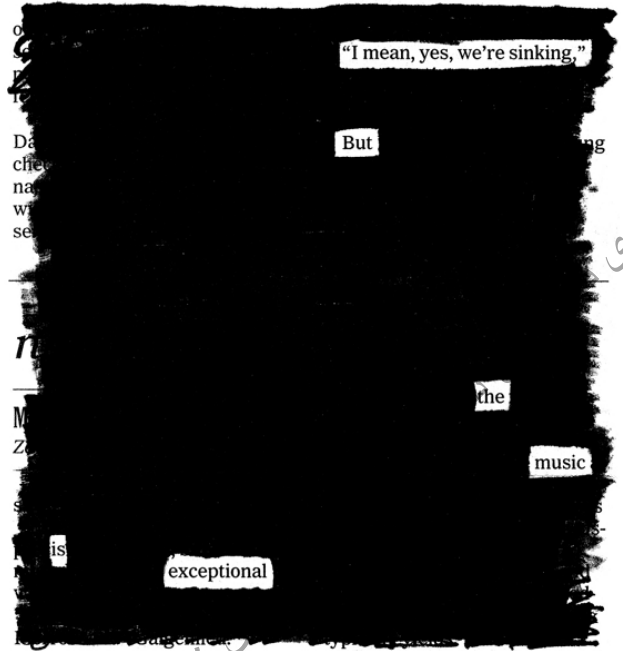
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10 WAYS TO STAY CREATIVE IN GOOD TIMES AND BAD

AUSTIN KLEON

WORKMAN PUBLISHING • NEW YORK

OVERHEARD ON THE TITANIC



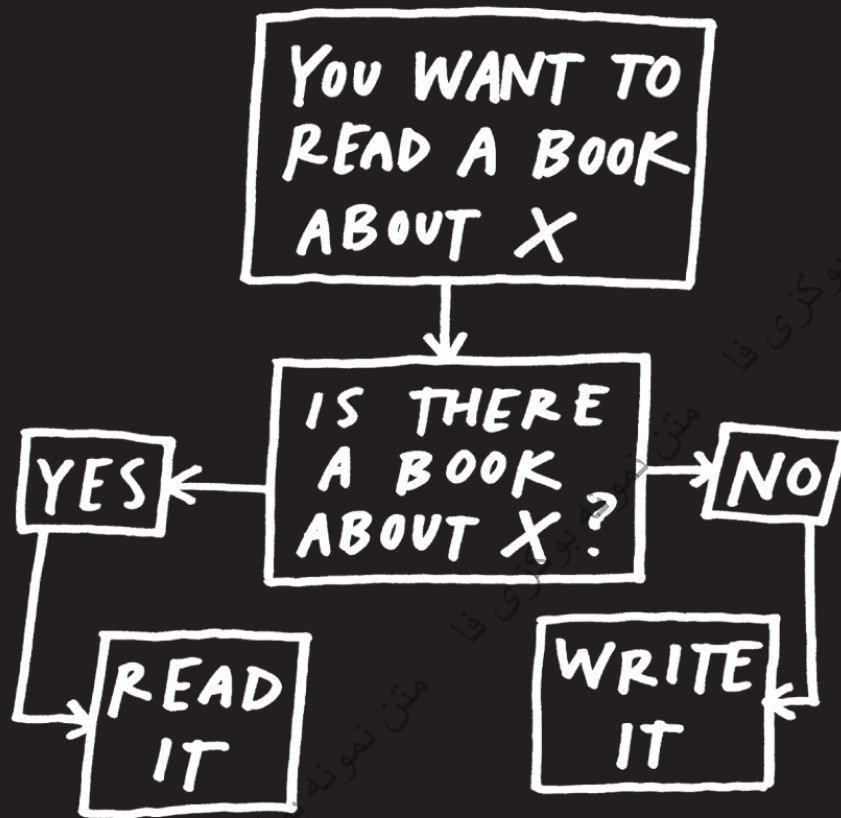
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① EVERY DAY IS
GROUND HOG DAY.

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TAKE ONE DAY AT A TIME.

“None of us know what will happen. Don’t spend time worrying about it. Make the most beautiful thing you can. Try to do that every day. That’s it.”

—Laurie Anderson

Whenever someone starts talking about “the creative journey,” I roll my eyes.

It sounds too lofty to me. Too heroic.

The only creative journey I seem to go on is the ten-foot commute from the back door of my house to the studio in my garage. I sit down at my desk and stare at a blank piece of paper and I think, “Didn’t I just do this yesterday?”

When I’m working on my art, I don’t feel like Odysseus. I feel more like Sisyphus rolling his boulder up the hill. When I’m working, I don’t feel like Luke Skywalker. I feel more like Phil Connors in the movie *Groundhog Day*.

For those of you who haven’t seen it or need your memory refreshed, *Groundhog Day* is a 1993 comedy starring Bill Murray as Phil Connors, a weatherman who gets stuck in a time loop and wakes up every morning on February 2nd—Groundhog Day—in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, home of

Punxsutawney Phil, the famous groundhog who, depending on if he sees his shadow or not, predicts whether there will be six more weeks of winter. Phil, the weatherman, hates Punxsutawney, and the town becomes a kind of purgatory for him. He tries everything he can think of, but he can't make it out of town, and he can't get to February 3rd. Winter, for Phil, is endless. No matter what he does, he still wakes up in the same bed every morning to face the same day.

In a moment of despair, Phil turns to a couple drunks at a bowling alley bar and asks them, "What would you do if you were stuck in one place, and every day was exactly the same, and nothing that you did mattered?"

It's the question Phil has to answer to advance the plot of the movie, but it's also the question we have to answer to advance the plot of our lives.

I think how you answer this question is your art.



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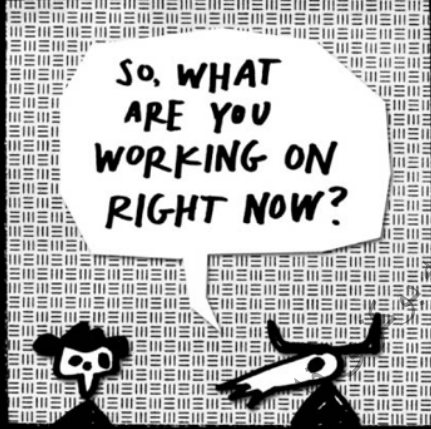
Now, I'm not the first person to suggest that *Groundhog Day* is perhaps *the* great parable of our time. Harold Ramis, the movie's director and cowriter, said he got endless letters from priests, rabbis, and monks, all praising the movie's spiritual message and claiming it for their own religion. But I think the movie has particular relevance for people who want to do creative work.

The reason is this: The creative life is *not* linear. It's not a straight line from point A to point B. It's more like a loop, or a spiral, in which you keep coming back to a new starting point after every project. No matter how successful you get, no matter what level of achievement you reach, you will never really "arrive." Other than death, there is no finish line or retirement for the creative person. "Even after you have achieved greatness," writes musician Ian Svenonius, "the infinitesimal cadre who even noticed will ask, 'What next?'"

The truly prolific artists I know always have that question answered, because they have figured out a *daily practice*—a repeatable way of working that insulates them from success, failure, and the chaos of the outside world. They have all identified what they want to spend their time on, and they work at it every day, no matter what. Whether their latest thing is universally rejected, ignored, or acclaimed, they know they'll still get up tomorrow and do their work.

We have so little control over our lives. The only thing we can really control is what we spend our days on. What we work on and how hard we work on it. It might seem like a stretch, but I really think the best thing you can do if you want to make art is to pretend you're starring in your own remake of *Groundhog Day*: Yesterday's over, tomorrow may never come, there's just today and what you can do with it.

"Any man can fight the battles of just one day," begins a passage collected in Richmond Walker's book of meditations for recovering alcoholics, *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*. "It is only when you and I add the burden of those two awful eternities, yesterday and tomorrow, that we break down. It is not the experience of today that drives men mad. It is remorse or bitterness for something which happened yesterday or the dread of what tomorrow may bring. Let us therefore do our best to live but one day at a time."



ESTABLISH A DAILY ROUTINE.

“Relying on craft and routine is a lot less sexy than being an artistic genius. But it is an excellent strategy for not going insane.”

—*Christoph Niemann*

EVERY DAY:

- HEAR A LITTLE SONG
- READ A GOOD POEM
- SEE A FINE PICTURE
- SPEAK A FEW
REASONABLE WORDS

— GOETHE

In his book *Daily Rituals*, Mason Currey catalogs the daily routines of 161 creative individuals: when they woke up, when they worked, what they ate, what they drank, how they procrastinated, and more. It's a wild collage of human behavior. Reading about the habits of writers alone is like visiting a human zoo. Kafka scribbled into the night while his family slept. Plath wrote in the morning before her children woke up. Balzac slugged fifty cups of coffee a day. Goethe sniffed rotten apples. Steinbeck had to sharpen twelve pencils before starting his work.

It's undeniably fun to read about the routines and rituals of creative people, but what becomes clear after a while is that there is no perfect, universal routine for creative work. "One's daily routine is a highly idiosyncratic collection of compromises, neuroses, and superstitions," Currey writes, "built up through trial and error and subject to a variety of external conditions." You can't just borrow your favorite artist's daily routine and expect it to work for you. Everyone's day is full of different obligations—jobs, families, social lives—and every creative person has a different temperament.

To establish your own routine, you have to spend some time observing your days and your moods. Where are the free spaces in your schedule? What could you cut out of your day to make time? Are you an early riser or a night owl? (I've met very few people who love working in the afternoon. "I detest this mongrel time, neither day nor night," wrote Charles Dickens.) Are there silly rituals or superstitions that get you in a creative mood? (I'm writing these words with a pencil, painted to look like a cigarette, dangling from my lips.)

the Muse

is ready to



surprise me

if

show up every day
and

say,

"Wanna hang out?"

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I suppose for some people a strict routine sounds like prison. But aren't we all, in a sense, "doing time?" When rapper Lil Wayne was in prison, I found myself envying his daily routine, which consisted of waking up at 11 a.m., drinking coffee, making phone calls, showering, reading fan mail, having lunch, making phone calls, reading, writing, having dinner, doing push-ups, listening to the radio, reading, and sleeping. "Man, I'll bet I could get a lot of writing done if I went to prison," I joked to my wife. (When I visited Alcatraz, I thought it would make the perfect writer's colony. *What a view!*)

A little imprisonment—if it's of your own making—can set you free. Rather than restricting your freedom, a routine gives you freedom by protecting you from the ups and downs of life and helping you take advantage of your limited time, energy, and talent. A routine establishes good habits that can lead to your best work.

Best of all, I think, is that when your days pretty much have the same shape, the days that don't have that shape become even more interesting. There's nothing like a good prison break, and playing hooky isn't as fun if you never go to school.

What your daily routine consists of is not that important. What's important is that the routine exists. Cobble together your own routine, stick to it most days, break from it once in a while for fun, and modify it as necessary.

"My hangovers are scheduled a year in advance."

—*John Waters*

MAKE LISTS.

“I make lists to keep my anxiety level down. If I write down fifteen things to be done, I lose that vague, nagging sense that there are an overwhelming number of things to be done, all of which are on the brink of being forgotten.”

—*Mary Roach*

SOME NOTES TO MYSELF →

HOW TO BE HAPPY

- ① READ OLD BOOKS.
- ② GO FOR LONG WALKS.
- ③ PLAY THE PIANO.
- ④ MAKE ART WITH KIDS.
- ⑤ WATCH SCREWBALL COMEDIES.
- ⑥ LISTEN TO SOUL MUSIC.
- ⑦ WRITE IN A DIARY.
- ⑧ TAKE NAPS.
- ⑨ LOOK AT THE MOON.
- ⑩ MAKE DUMB LISTS.

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