

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLER

"Beautiful."

—Chris Anderson

Curator of the TED
Conference.

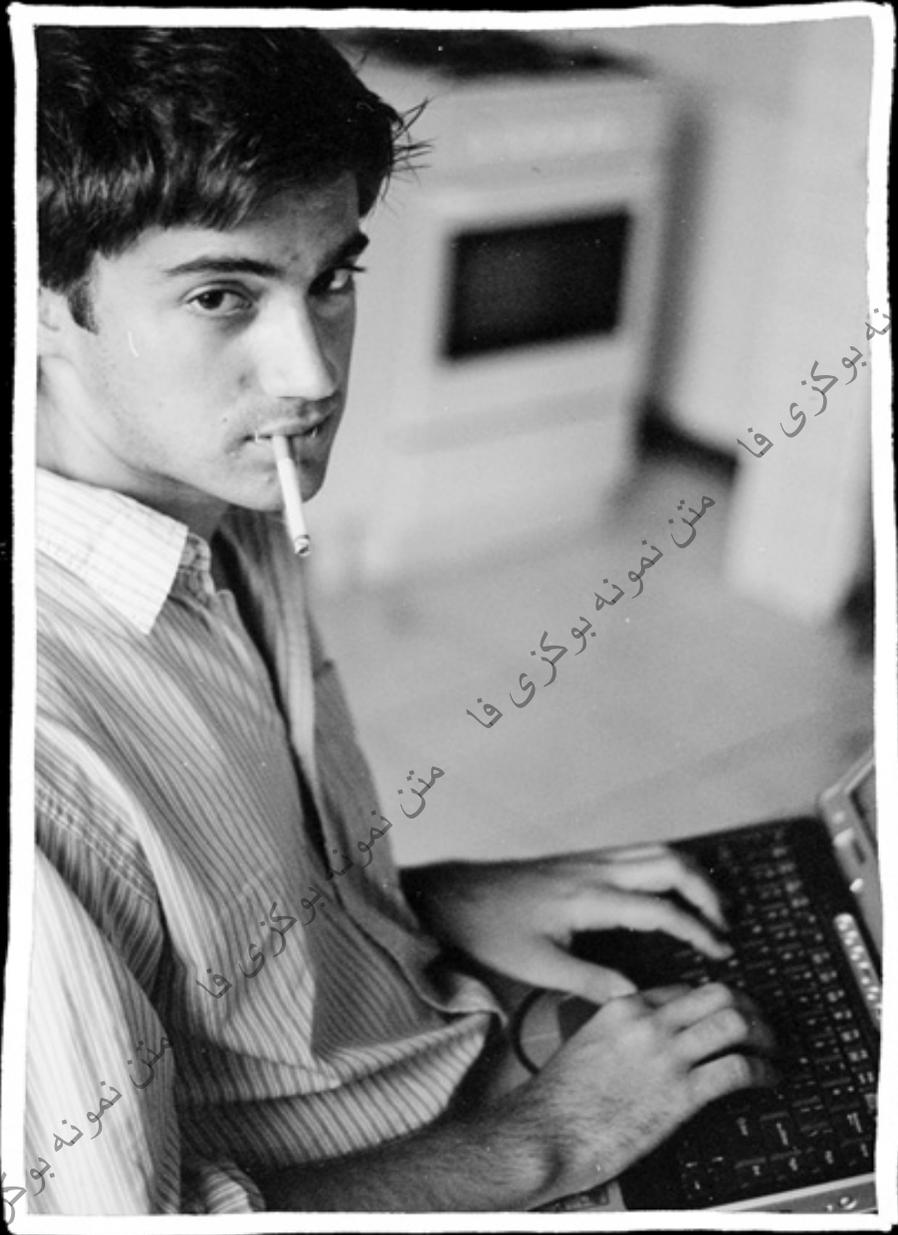
STEAL LIKE AN ARTIST

10 THINGS NOBODY TOLD YOU ABOUT BEING CREATIVE

AUSTIN KLEON

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19-YEAR-OLD ME
COULD USE SOME
ADVICE...

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ALL ADVICE IS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL.

It's one of my theories that when people give you advice, they're really just talking to themselves in the past.

This book is me talking to a previous version of myself.

These are things I've learned over almost a decade of trying to figure out how to make art, but a funny thing happened when I started sharing them with others—I realized that they aren't just for artists. They're for everyone.

These ideas apply to anyone who's trying to inject some creativity into their life and their work. (That should describe all of us.)

In other words: This book is for you.

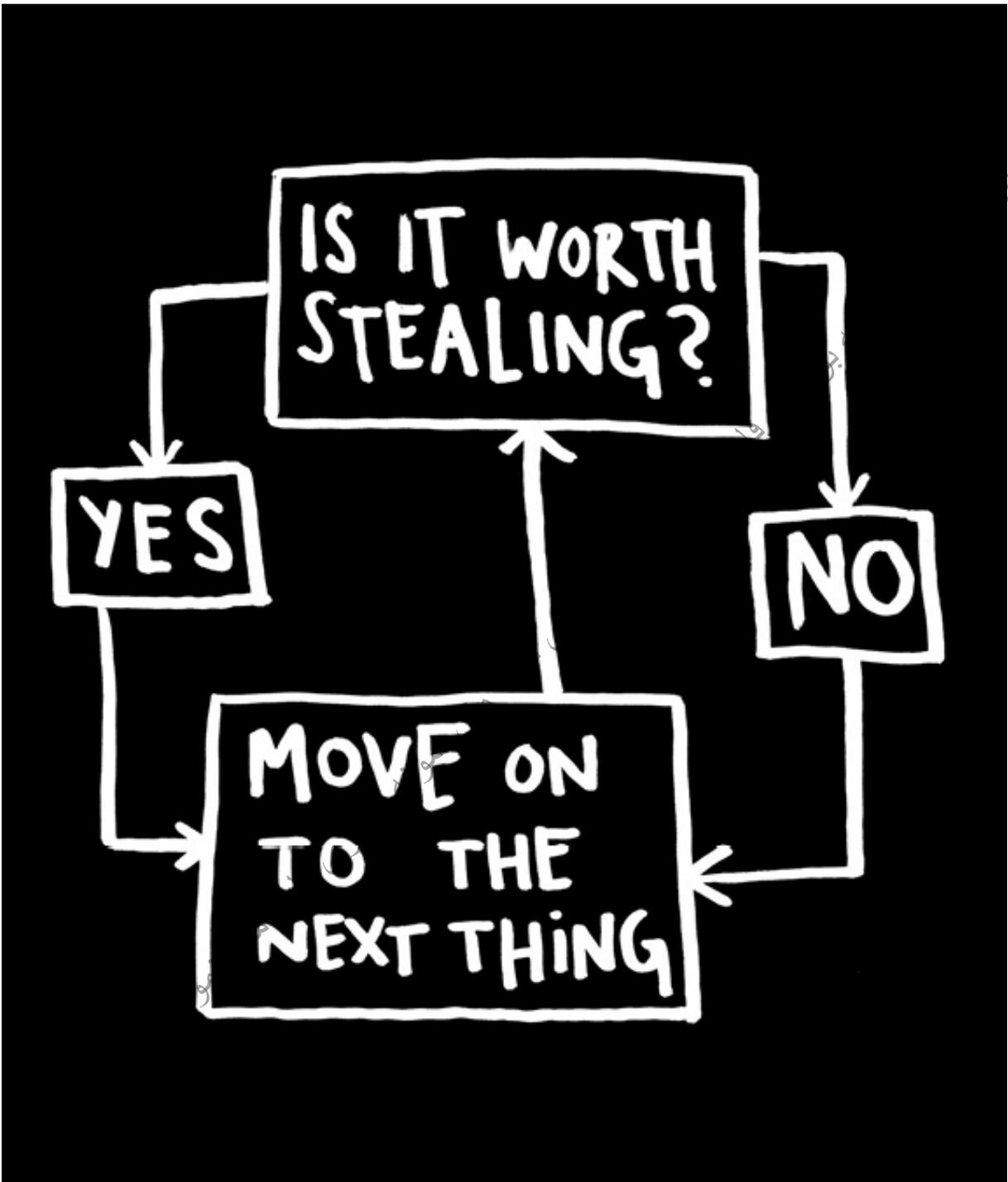
Whoever you are, whatever you make.

Let's get started.

① STEALLIKE
AN ARTIST.

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HOW TO LOOK AT THE WORLD (LIKE AN ARTIST)

Every artist gets asked the question,

“Where do you get your ideas?”

The honest artist answers,

“I steal them.”

How does an artist look at the world?

First, you figure out what’s worth stealing, then you move on to the next thing.

That’s about all there is to it.

When you look at the world this way, you stop worrying about what’s “good” and what’s “bad”—there’s only stuff worth stealing, and stuff that’s not worth stealing.

Everything is up for grabs. If you don’t find something worth stealing today, you might find it worth stealing tomorrow or a month or a year from

NOTHING IS ORIGINAL.

The writer Jonathan Lethem has said that when people call something “original,” nine out of ten times they just don’t know the references or the original sources involved.

What a good artist understands is that nothing comes from nowhere. All creative work builds on what came before. Nothing is completely original.

It’s right there in the Bible: “There is nothing new under the sun.”

(Ecclesiastes 1:9)

Some people find this idea depressing, but it fills me with hope. As the French writer André Gide put it, “Everything that needs to be said has already been said. But, since no one was listening, everything must be said again.”

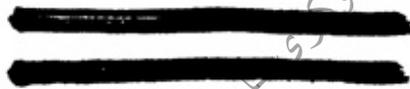
If we’re free from the burden of trying to be completely original, we can stop trying to make something out of nothing, and we can embrace influence instead of running away from it.

“What is originality? Undetected plagiarism.”

THE GENEALOGY of IDEAS

Every new idea is just a mashup or a remix of one or more previous ideas.

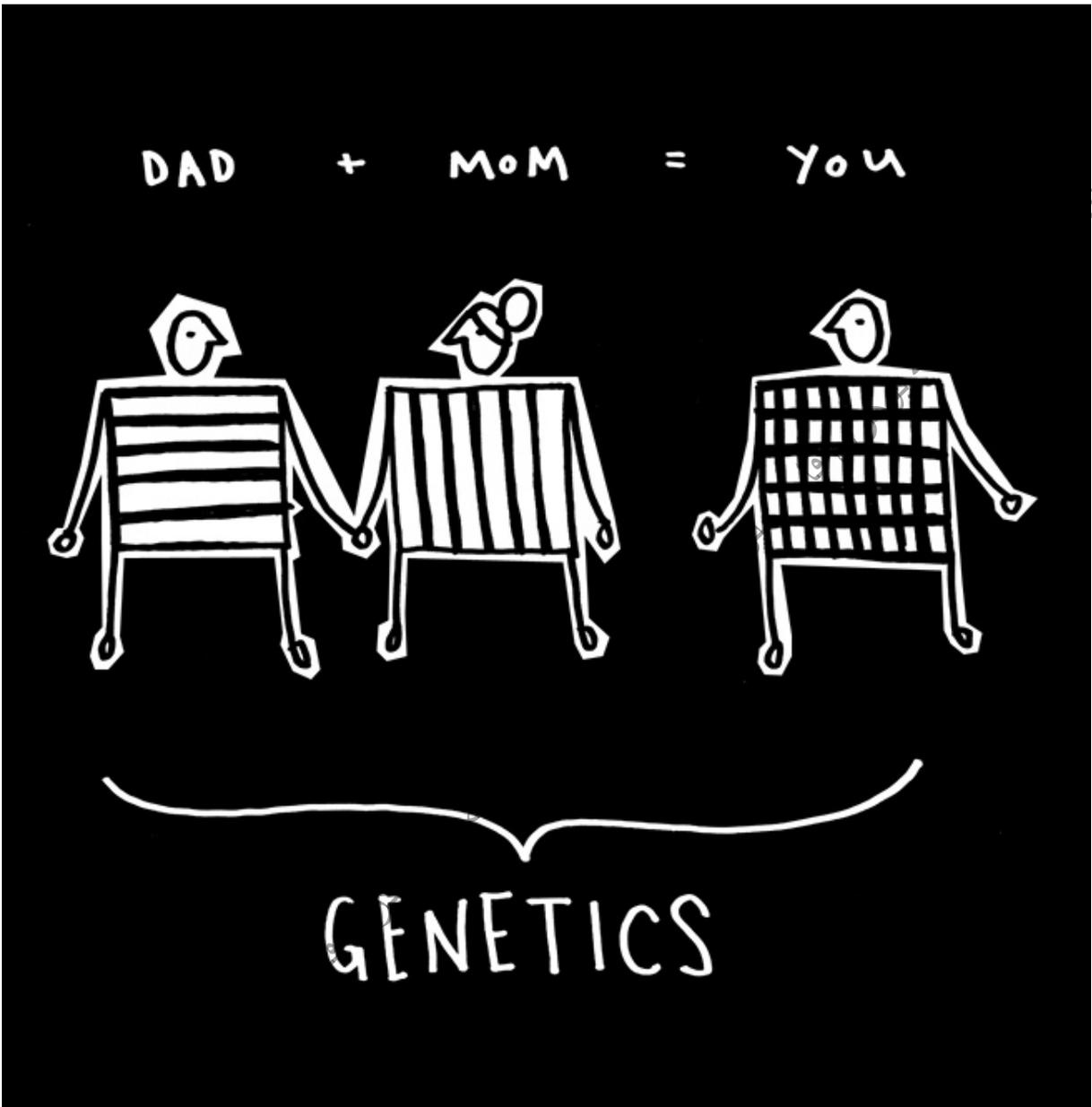
Here's a trick they teach you in art school. Draw two parallel lines on a piece of paper:



How many lines are there?

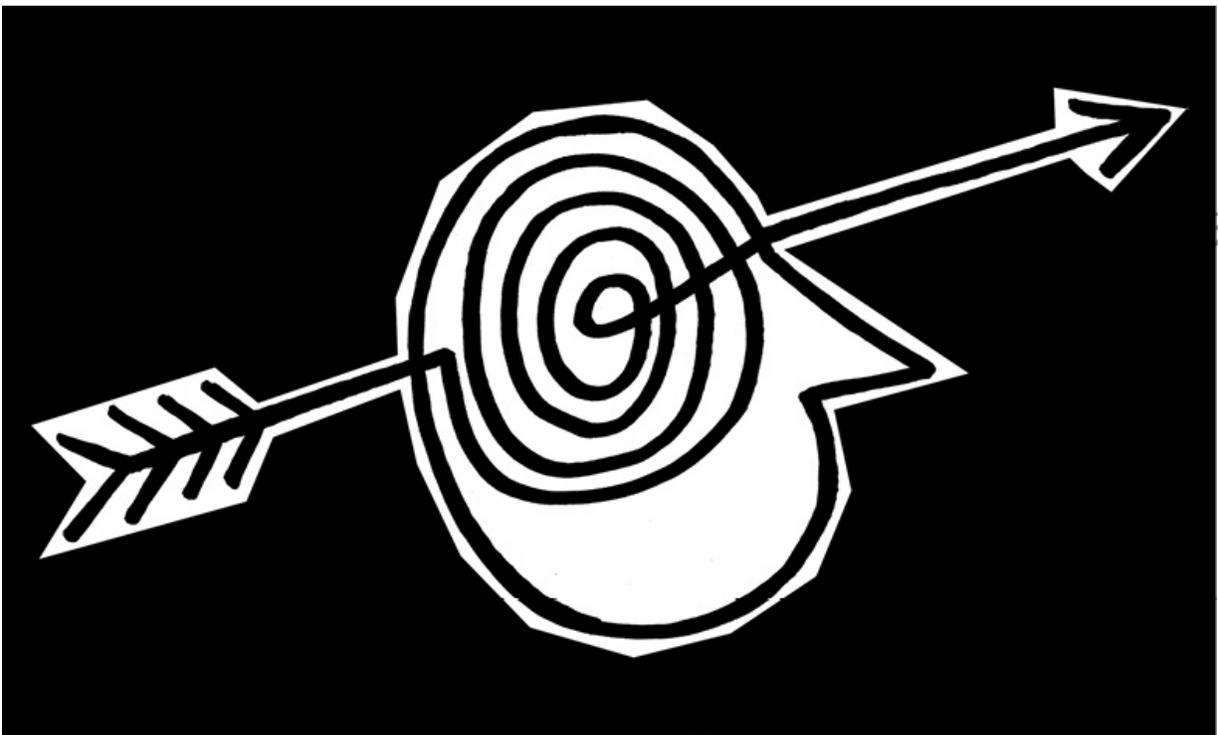
There's the first line, the second line, but then there's a line of negative space that runs between them.

See it? $1 + 1 = 3$.



A good example is genetics. You have a mother and you have a father. You possess features from both of them, but the sum of you is bigger than their parts. You're a remix of your mom and dad and all of your ancestors.

Just as you have a familial genealogy, you also have a genealogy of ideas. You don't get to pick your family, but you can pick your teachers and you



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GARBAGE IN, GARBAGE OUT.

The artist is a collector. Not a hoarder, mind you, there's a difference: Hoarders collect indiscriminately, artists collect selectively. They only collect things that they really love.

There's an economic theory out there that if you take the incomes of your five closest friends and average them, the resulting number will be pretty close to your own income.

I think the same thing is true of our idea incomes. You're only going to be as good as the stuff you surround yourself with. My mom used to say to me, "Garbage in, garbage out." It used to drive me nuts. But now I know what she meant.

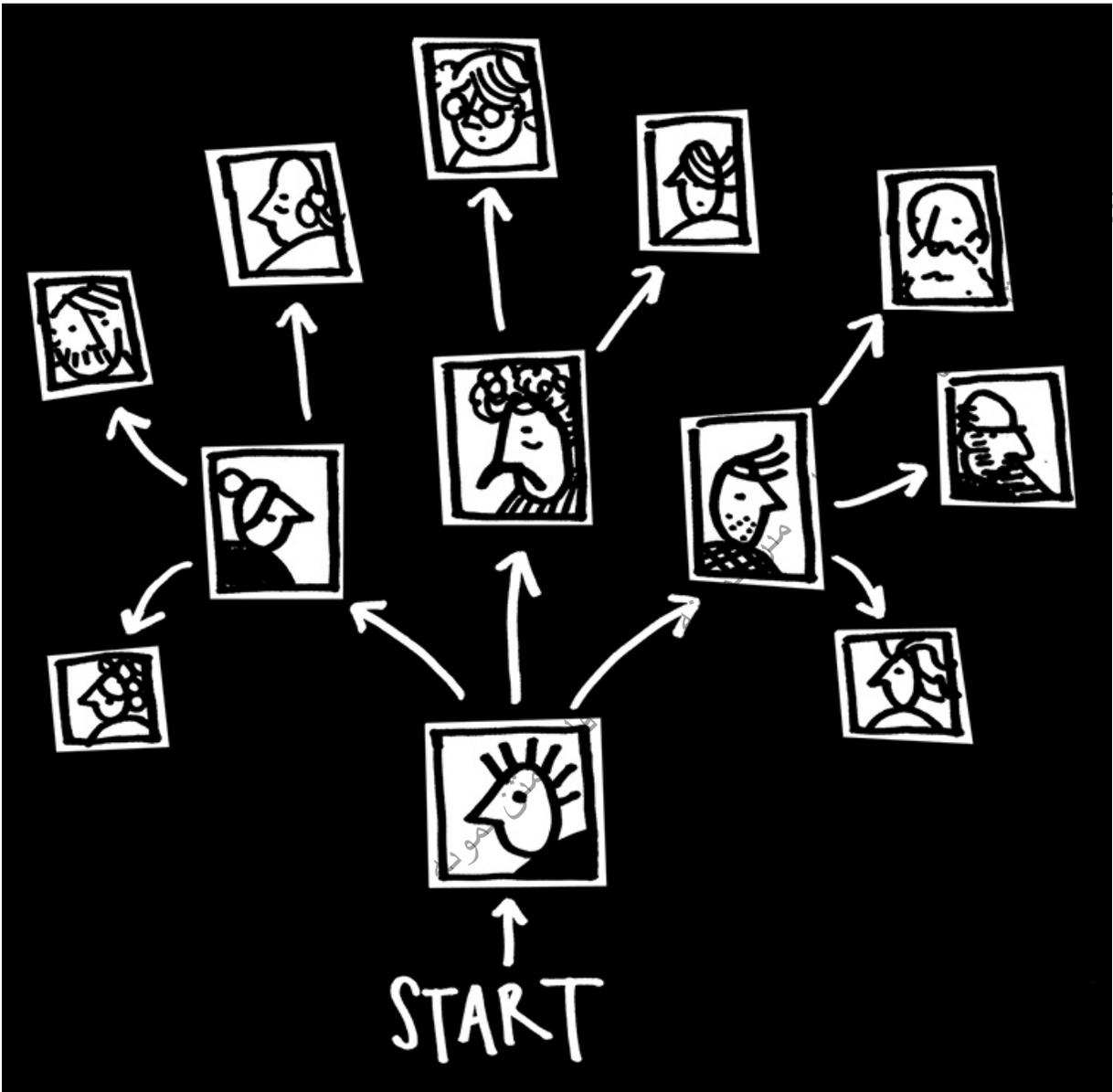
Your job is to collect good ideas. The more good ideas you collect, the more you can choose from to be influenced by.

"Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination. Devour old films, new films, music, books, paintings, photographs, poems, dreams, random conversations, architecture, bridges, street signs, trees, clouds,

CLIMB YOUR OWN FAMILY TREE.

Marcel Duchamp said, “I don’t believe in art. I believe in artists.” This is actually a pretty good method for studying—if you try to devour the history of your discipline all at once, you’ll choke.

Instead, chew on one thinker—writer, artist, activist, role model—you really love. Study everything there is to know about that thinker. Then find three people that thinker loved, and find out everything about them. Repeat this as many times as you can. Climb up the tree as far as you can go. Once you build your tree, it’s time to start your own branch.



Seeing yourself as part of a creative lineage will help you feel less alone as you start making your own stuff. I hang pictures of my favorite artists in my studio. They're like friendly ghosts. I can almost feel them pushing me forward as I'm hunched over my desk.

The great thing about dead or remote masters is that they can't refuse you as an apprentice. You can learn whatever you want from them. They left their

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