

# gather the people

a human approach to marketing  
for people who would rather make what they love  
than persuade people to buy it

SARAH AVENIR

**Preview**

# gather the people



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— PREVIEW SAMPLE —

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# GATHER THE PEOPLE

*A human approach to marketing  
for people who would rather make what they love  
than persuade people to buy it*

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Sarah Avenir

*to my people,*

*big & small*

*“A poem begins as a lump in the throat,  
a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a love  
sickness. It is never a thought to begin  
with.”*

— ROBERT FROST

*“Listen to Robert Frost. Start with a big, fat  
lump in your throat, start with a profound  
sense of wrong, a deep homesickness, a  
crazy love sickness, and run with it. If  
you imagine less, less will be what you  
undoubtedly deserve. Do what you love,  
and don't stop until you get what you  
love. Work as hard as you can, imagine  
immensities, don't compromise, and don't  
waste time. Start now. Not twenty years  
from now, not two weeks from now. Now.”*

— DEBBIE MILLMAN

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# Preface



When I published the first version of *Gather the People* in 2015, I had been angsty over it for years. A sudden financial setback got me to finally stop ruminating and put my pen to good use.

Now it's 2020, and I've been angsty over the second edition for years, re-writing it four different times, and at one point thinking I would just scrap the whole thing and write an entirely different book. And then the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

After a month or so of reeling at the shock of the lockdown and what it could mean for &yet, the consultancy I lead as CEO (on top of worrying about the health and safety of literally everyone), I was finally able to get honest with myself. This book was my contribution to my industry during a time when I desperately needed to be a contribution. Why was I so hesitant to release an updated edition so others could continue to benefit from it?

Since its initial release, this book has been used by artists and business owners, technologists and writers, strategists and startups. It's been referenced in business curriculum at institutions as grassroots as Author Accelerator and as formal as the University of Pennsylvania. But for the past several years, it hasn't been available anywhere for purchase. I had taken it off the shelves in order to do a light revision, thinking it would only take me a few months. A writer's famous last words.



I get questions every couple of weeks asking me when the book will be available again. But it took the shaking up of our metaphorical snow globe to make me realize that I needed to take my own medicine (from the prologue, even!) and focus on being a contribution, rather than on achieving some grander vision than what was already right in front of me.

I will probably continue to learn lessons from this book for the rest of my life. Every time I've rewritten it, I've gone through the exercises with my current major project. I have never failed to come away from it with renewed clarity on the value of my work, as well as the steps I need to take to ensure it gets in the hands and hearts of the people I'm creating it for.

Whether this is your first reading or your twelfth, I'm excited for you. In doing the exercises within these pages, you are sure to discover something new every time. I'd love to hear about the insights you're having and the projects you're working on: shoot me an email at [sarah@andyet.com](mailto:sarah@andyet.com). And if you get stuck at any point (even if you've been stuck for years), that's normal. Email me at that same address, and I'm happy to nudge you back on your way.

If you're interested in other topics related to people first growth (and also weird and wonderful side projects our team does for the love of it), I invite you to take a look at the resources we're creating for you at [andyet.com](http://andyet.com). Our newsletter is the best way to stay up-to-date. We're always sharing what we're learning there.

Thanks for reading; I can't wait to see what you make next.

# Prologue



I LOVE AMBITIOUS PEOPLE. People who talk about their dreams, and the air seems to crackle around their words. People who remind me that the human spirit is truly unlimited, and the world outside my doorstep is blooming with possibility. I need these people in my life, especially when my circumstances seem to paint a different picture.

I am comfortable with big visions. Big visions are perfect, and as far as I know, perfectly attainable. No one can smear the canvas that exists in my head. It is when I pull out my brush and begin mixing the paints that all the problems start happening. The big vision, as lovely as it will eventually be, has to be born like anything else. It starts out primitive, unformed. It matures into an idea that is ready to take its first steps into the world, stumbling on pudgy, unfamiliar feet. In the beginning, it needs constant care and attention to develop into maturity.

I'm writing this book from the perspective of someone who has been invited to help people bring big, ambitious projects into the online world. Because of the collaborative, community-driven nature of my approach, I used to describe it as building a nation.

One of the problems with framing this work as “nation-building” (besides the colonialist one!) is that these words immediately direct your focus to the outcome — this new world being created. You focus on building the assets that will make the nation function and sustain itself. The airtight business plan. The brand that people adore. The story behind it all. The well-designed website. The top-rated

blog. The friendly social media strategy. The innovative products. The mailing list with the clever incentive to sign up. All of these things, and more, can come together to make an impressive-looking nation.

But that's not what a nation is. A nation is *people*. Building all of these things before you have the people is like building sidewalks before you see where the people actually walk — you end up with a lot of unused sidewalks, and a lot of muddy paths criss-crossing to bypass them.

When I lived on the Virginian coast, I worked near a beautiful retail space that I would often walk to on my lunch break. It was called Waterside (an obvious naming choice, being right on the river). It was a cross between a shopping mall and a public market, its vendors being a mix of locally owned shops and restaurants situated alongside well-known chains. It was designed to be full of light and art and beauty. It was also basically a ghost town.

I almost felt guilty going inside; the shops' proprietors were so eager, and I was only one person. I might see an out-of-towner or two browsing with wistful, confused looks on their faces, but that was rare. Mostly it was just me and the shop owners. Too bad I could only eat one sandwich (maybe one and a half on a good day.)

I imagine that when the investors and architects and builders got together to discuss their grand vision, they never imagined that despite the beautiful location, the mix of vendors, the thoughtful design, and the significant investment, their project would fail to bring in the people needed to support it.

If we've ever had a grand vision of our own, we are both familiar with this and surprised by it. We think if we just had more money, more resources, more time, our flopped projects would have worked out. But so often, that's not the case.

### — How do we avoid our big visions becoming ghost towns? How do we avoid our work getting bypassed for the muddy path?

In her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, urban activist Jane Jacobs says, "You can't make people use streets they have no reason to use. You can't make people watch streets they do not want to watch." No matter how many resources you throw at a project, this fact remains.

We need to take our focus away from what the big vision looks like and put our focus instead on the people who that big vision is *for*. Instead of spending our time alone in a room, creating what we want to make by ourselves (or with our team, for that matter), we need to bring our big vision down to where the people are, and start collaborating with them to create one small thing after another, eventually adding up to something big.

Of course, when we step back after a while of doing this, we will see that the big vision we have created often looks nothing like what was in our heads to begin with. It is far, far better. The process of collaborative creation led us to new and wonderful discoveries and took us down paths that were previously invisible to us. We could never have

conceived it in the beginning, because there was so much we couldn't have known until we began putting the work out into the world.

Not only will we have made something better than we dreamed, but we will not have to worry about whether our work can sustain itself, financially or otherwise. We've already proven that it can, over and over and over, with small endeavors that were allowed to go out into the world and build their muscles, proving their worth and sustainability over time. And we never have to worry about people not using the sidewalks — because the people who will be using them are a crucial part of the team who helped build them.

Building small to build big is a concept you will see repeated often throughout this book. If you find yourself with limited resources, this should be a relief to you — those limits can actually become a gift.

When I wrote the first edition of this book, I had recently been laid off from a dream job at a software company. I had fallen in love with this team when we worked together as consultant and client, and they eventually wooed me to join them. It didn't take much wooing. As a formerly one-woman show who had been working on my own for eight years (with a stint as an employer at one point), daily collaboration with these incredible people was an experience I didn't want to miss. I said yes.

Unfortunately, life being what it sometimes is, timing turned out to be terrible. Practically as soon as I was hired, we lost our biggest contract. That loss started a chain of events that eventually led to down-sizing. Suddenly, I was on my own again.

I'm telling you this because this book would not be written if I hadn't suddenly found myself in that situation. I had been working on this book for two years, but I was just comfortable enough for it to be a low priority. Whenever I did work on it, I agonized over it, loving it one day and loathing it the next.

But when I got laid off, suddenly it became clear to me — no matter what I decided to do next, I needed to finish this book. Even though I had limited time (I had 50 days until the money ran out and the rent became due), even though I had limited resources (I had already used the last of my savings to help bridge a gap brought on by a furlough), I believed I could find my way to that big vision again. I believed it because I had experienced it, many times, both personally and while working with other people. Building small to build big not only allows us to prove to ourselves that our dreams will work — it also allows us to start building a big vision even when it seems we have little to build it with.

Fast forward six years later, I am now CEO of &yet, the company I was laid off from. After writing this book, I not only closed the gap in my rent in the short-term, but I re-built my platform as a consultant. Within a year of publishing, my client base was stronger than it had ever been. Within two years, I had enough money to invest in becoming a partner in the business. I'm now leading our team of designers, developers, and strategists in building an education platform that helps leaders of people first companies take a more human approach to growth.

I believe in the creative power of setbacks, frustration, and limits. It may be human nature to desire comfort and safety, but in the end, it's the rug that's yanked out from under us that often does the trick of getting us moving.

If the rug has been yanked out from under you, or if the circumstances in your life threaten to hold you back from your big vision, this book is especially for you. I've been up on the mountain top with plenty of money, comfort, and ease, and also down in the valley with none of it. I was in the valley when I originally wrote this book. No matter where you are now, let any less-than-ideal circumstances become the constraints that give urgency and focus to your big vision.

I am a strategy person. (I even have a strategy for eating my toast in the morning, butter-side down so I can taste it.) I like strategies that are simple enough that one person can do them, and scalable enough that entire organizations can build the principles into their processes. I like strategies that are self-perpetuating, where each part feeds the other parts, so if you're working on one thing, you're working on everything. And I like strategies that honor people and do not seek to manipulate or exploit relationships. These are the type of strategies I am giving to you.

I put together the tools in this book to help you see a clear path forward to not only creating your dream as a contribution to others, but to building a life that is truer, more meaningful, and more full of joy, passion and creative fulfillment than you can currently envision.

May today be the beginning of something extraordinary.



CHAPTER ONE

# A Framework



THERE ARE TWO THINGS THAT ARE HARD ABOUT DOING CREATIVE WORK. First, doing the work, and second, getting people to care about it. This book deals primarily with the second part. It does this by also dealing with the first.

It's easy to see why doing the work is hard. Whether you're writing a book, producing a film, starting a business, making music, designing an experience, or any other creative pursuit, we all share this struggle. There are distractions, we'd rather be watching Netflix, we're tired, there's no time, we're not good enough, we'll never be good enough. Eventually, we must find ways to solve these problems if we are even to begin work as creative professionals.

But most people I've been privileged to work with struggle more on the "getting people to care" side of things. Doing the work is difficult, but then what? How can we be sure our work reaches its potential as a catalyst for others to do, be, or experience something new? How can our work provide us with what we need to keep doing it — a roof over our heads, food on the table, and provision for our families (and/or employees) at the very least? How can we realize the impact we want to have with our big vision?

Usually, we're told the answer falls somewhere between two spectrums. On the one end, we believe we just need to make great work. After all, the secret to getting people to care is to make something worth caring about, right? If they don't care, it's because we didn't do a good enough job.

On the other end of the spectrum, we believe we just need better marketing, or maybe more of it. If we're loud enough and we have the right message, people will eventually buy whatever we're selling.

Both of these lines of thinking are destructive for creative people. Although they seem perfectly rational and full of good sense, they lead us to behaviors that don't actually solve our problems (and often make them worse).

## If you build it, they will come...maybe

We're often told we live in a meritocracy, where the best work gains the most traction and is ultimately the most successful. Sadly, I know this isn't true. Take a stroll through any big box store, and look at the products that made it onto the shelves. Are they the best designed? The most innovative? The highest quality? Sometimes, but rarely.

At the same time, there's no way of knowing how many brilliant, well-executed endeavors have gotten lost in obscurity. But we do know artists whose work *almost* died with them — Emily Dickinson, Vincent van Gogh, Franz Kafka, Henry David Thoreau, Stieg Larsson — there are countless examples of great work that nearly missed being known, much less celebrated.

Of course, most of us aren't attempting to be a world-renowned artist or competing for shelf space at a big box store. But there are other consequences to that way of thinking.

Ironically, when we believe we must produce fantastic work in order to be successful, it diminishes our chances for doing so. Our vision becomes muddled with the pressure to make something not only *we* think is great, but that *other people* think is great. This may have nothing to do with ego — our survival suddenly hinges on it. If our work isn't great, people won't care about it, and then where will we be?

At my former marketing company, Julianne (one of my first employees) helped sear this lesson into my head. We'd get together for a brainstorming session with the intent to come up with new and innovative ideas for a

project. Because I was so aware of financial needs and other practical constraints, I would discard any idea that “wouldn’t work” almost immediately. I was so focused on survival that I couldn’t brainstorm. I ended up earning the nickname “the bus” because I was always running over our ideas before they even had a chance to breathe.

Because of this, Julianne would start any brainstorming session by declaring that we were now in the “brainstorm bubble.” Inside the bubble, we would celebrate terrible ideas, crazy ideas, and ideas that would never work. Until she popped the bubble, I wasn’t allowed to drive my bus over any of them.

It’s been said over and over, but it’s still worth repeating because it’s so hard to learn: we have to be willing to fail if we’re to take the creative risks necessary to produce our best work. And that means taking “great” work (or even “financially viable” work) off the table in order to consider innovative ideas that are more likely to lead to its eventual success.

The biggest issue though, isn’t that we risk not making something great. It’s what this way of thinking does to ourselves as people. When we attach the value of our work too closely to the reactions and opinions of others, our vision becomes co-dependent on feedback that is as variable as the people who give it. Whatever people think, no matter their experience or level of expertise, there is going to be another person with the exact opposite point of view.

## Good marketing will save us...maybe

On the other end of the spectrum, even while we wonder if we just need to make better work to gain the traction we're seeking, some part of us believes better marketing will save us. Ever since the Internet gave everyone equal access to the free publication of ideas, and social media gave us a way to broadcast those ideas to our networks, the possibility of "going viral" has shimmered like a mirage. We spend heaps of time on the Internet trying to get attention focused our direction, but it never seems to be enough. It reminds me of the scene in the Phantom Tollbooth where the Mathemagician serves his guests Subtraction Stew. The more everyone eats, the hungrier they get.

Even when we get some scraps of attention thrown our way, those sudden bursts often do less for the long-term success of our work than we expected. We may get a lot of website visitors one day, but do those visitors stick around long enough to buy our work? A small percentage of them might, but it's not sustainable.

Not to mention that the pursuit of that kind of recognition and reach can be toxic, both to our work and to ourselves. The Subtraction Stew feeds a hunger, not just for sales to make our work sustainable, but for constant likes and favorites to validate who we are. When our security becomes attached to these metrics, we are insecure, indeed. I like to think that I have the character to resist that kind of siren call, but it's a regular struggle. I have to be vigilant about the source of my self-worth.

When we're not spending too much time on the Internet, we often spend too much time creating the assets that make our work look legitimate, hoping they will help

people to understand and care about what we've made. We might spend months agonizing over our brand, thinking if we just get that perfect name and/or tagline, we'll be set. A thoughtful, well-designed identity will give us instant clarity and credibility, and we won't have to try so hard. We might spend half a year on our website, only to discover in the end that no one comes to it. We might spend hours re-packaging and re-positioning everything we have to offer, writing new sales pages and adjusting the countless variables that could possibly influence our success.

But those things, while valuable, are not the main thing. They can even take us away from the main thing if we let them.

## The real problem with making people care

If the problem with making people care lies within the quality of the work or the quality of the marketing (or maybe a little of both), we just have to keep working harder at what we've been doing. That will probably get us where we want to go, eventually. But I believe there's another solution.

When I hired my first employees in 2010, I was easily frustrated that I couldn't get people on my team to adopt my ideas and run with them. I had to explain (a lot) and delegate (a lot) and follow up (a lot). I felt like the team cheerleader. *Go team, go! Here's where I want you to go! Please, please go!*

I hadn't yet developed the maturity to understand that a.) my ideas weren't necessarily the best ideas and b.) people are committed to the ideas they help create.

This principle is not limited to leadership; it's also a helpful parenting strategy. When I see a problem with my kids and I want to impose limits and consequences, I can choose to come up with the rules and dictate them, or I can tell my kids what the problem is, and invite them to help solve it.

Mom-as-law-enforcer doesn't work well with our kids because we've taught them to be critical thinkers. It's a good long-term approach, but it backfires when we're trying to get these small people to do what we want — our kids often use their intelligence and thoughtfulness to question our own authority as we have taught them to question others'.



Instead, we've learned to invite them to share ownership in whatever problem we want to solve. Instead of pushing our law onto them, our job is to frame the problem, help them figure out their own solution, and then follow up. Suddenly, they're coming up with their own limits and consequences and enforcing them even when we're not there (in fact, my oldest takes enforcement to a whole new level).

I learned to use this approach on a leadership level from my husband and business partner Adam Avenir. He rarely starts by announcing "this is what we're going to do." Instead, he takes a vague idea and starts having conversations with people about it, genuinely curious about what they think and how their ideas might improve it. Every person he talks to helps shape the idea in some way until it's concrete enough to share with everyone and officially get started. In this way, he takes Pablo Picasso's advice: "You have to have a vague idea of what you are going to do, but it should be a vague idea."

Shared ownership is powerful. People are more committed to what they helped build, and they often come up with creative solutions that work far better than anything you would have tried. Then you're not trying to push what you want onto other people; instead, people are working together to solve a problem that matters to them, and they themselves are pushing it through and making it a success.

When I realized this, it immediately made me a better leader and a better parent. And I began to wonder, what if we could take this principle and apply it to creative work? What if the answer to getting people to care started with involving them in the process?

Collaborating with our communities not only helps people to care about it, but also fixes many of the other problems associated with doing creative work.

**It gives us accountability**, so we're more likely to follow through with our ideas.

**It gives us instant feedback** from the people who will be using what we've made, so we spend less time on ideas that aren't going to work and more time on ideas that will.

**It simplifies our process**, so we don't have to see "doing the work" and "making people care about it" as two separate jobs. When we focus instead on doing our work in a way that makes people care, we become more efficient and effective. Marketing our work is no longer a huge chore; much of the time we used to spend on marketing and promotion, we now spend on collaboration and research.

Because collaborating with our communities works at solving these problems so well, I now use this principle as part of a framework for creating our work in a way that ensures that it's well-received in the world.

## A framework for creating work that people love, buy, and share

I've tried to make this framework as simple and strategic as possible, while also giving practical tactics that anyone can apply to any creative project. In this book, we'll be exploring this framework in a linear fashion (since that's the way books are read), but it would be more accurate to describe it as a circle. Because we're building small to build big, we take each small iteration through the cycle, and then start over again to create the next iteration using what we've learned.

You'll start by taking stock of what you have to work with and then figuring out the direction that you want to go. This is a very personal process, based on what you have, what you want, and what you need. Before we are able to effectively serve others, we have to start with ourselves.

Next, you'll decide on a creative project to focus on, even if the idea is not perfectly defined yet. Then you'll figure out your own approach to gathering people together around your shared beliefs and things you care about. You'll come up with a simple story and invitation that will help you communicate your idea broadly, at first, in order to give you room to refine your idea as you start exploring it with others.

After that, you'll start collaborating with your community and creating your work out loud. You'll discover ways to make good progress and protect your focus that work with your personality and creative preferences. You'll also learn new habits to integrate into your workflow that will encourage new people to find your work and become part of your community.

When your work is almost finished, you'll pre-release it, and then use what you learn from that process for the official release when it's finished. You'll create a sales process that integrates seamlessly with your creative rhythms and that helps people make a well-educated decision about buying your work.

Finally, you'll learn how to focus on growth when you're ready for it. You'll create strategies for potent and effective ways to collaborate with new people to deepen your relationships and increase the impact of your work.

The timeline for each cycle can be quick, or it can be slow, depending on the scope of your project and how long it takes for your ideas to percolate. You could have a small idea for a project and create the first version and sell it within a week, or you could take months to have conversations with people in your community, finally land on a project idea, and spend months building it and releasing it. That's the nature of creative work — sometimes ideas come to us hard and fast, and sometimes they take their sweet time. Simply start at the beginning and work your way through, and you'll find your footing.

The strategies within this book will allow you not only to create your big vision, but to share it with more people — people who will value your work as the gift that it is, and celebrate it, and be changed by it. I believe with all my heart this is not only possible for you, but it's closer than you think. All you need to do is begin.

CHAPTER TWO

# Taking Inventory



IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS CHAOS. It's a creative pattern older than the written word. We may think creative work starts with a blank canvas, but what we are really dealing with is a jumble of potential that only looks like blankness to the outside observer. We know the truth; it is our job to take whatever crude resources we've been given — our ideas, skills, materials, tools — and turn them into a created work that has form and purpose. These resources are where any creative project begins, and it is where we will begin, as well.

Our focus on the blank canvas tells me something. We often take the resources driving our work for granted. I'm not just talking about paints and brushes. I'm talking about our interests, skills, experiences, ideas, relationships, perspectives...all the elements that cross-pollinate to inform what we make, and how we make it. When we take these resources for granted, inspiration seems to come to us randomly, out of nowhere. (This is why creative blocks are so common; when we think inspiration comes from nowhere, we freak out when it stops coming. Doing our work effectively seems completely out of our control.)

But inspiration does not come from nowhere. It comes from the intersection of those tangible and intangible resources that are unique to us. When we start paying attention to these elements, we start to see that inspiration is not as capricious as we once thought. And what's more, we'll stop worrying about "adding to the noise" or doing something that's already been done elsewhere. We are each, individually, an endangered species. If we're to be

worried about anything, we should be more concerned with the eventual extinction of the one voice that is ours than about being a bother.

I like to play a game. It's called Two Things. All you have to do to play is think of the first two things that pop into your head, and then put them together in a new way. Trees. Record player. A forest of trees that each have their own individual sounds grafted into their branches. Sweater. Refrigerator. A sweater closet you can borrow from while you're shopping in the refrigerated section of the grocery store (I am currently freezing while I write this).

Two Things represents the core of what it means to create. When we take ideas, materials, or other resources and combine them to make something new, we create options for ourselves and others that didn't exist before. We do this with our work, and we can do this with our lives.

But first you have to be aware of the "things" you have to work with. To help you do this, we're going to take inventory of your resources — the ones you can see, and the ones you can't. This exercise will help you see options where you used to see limits and inspiration where you used to see a blank canvas. If inspiration isn't hitting you over the head, going back to your resources is a helpful first step toward deciding on a creative path or project.

If you're already clear on the direction your life and work is going, you may want to do this exercise anyway, especially if you've never taken the time to intentionally become aware of the resources available to you. It's inspiring to see how much you have to work with; there is so much we never consider as fodder for our creative work. And you never know...you just might start seeing connections that lead you in a totally new direction.

## Your resources

The easiest way to take inventory of your resources is to make lists. I'm an avid list-maker, so I might be biased — if mind maps or free-writing is more your thing, then go for it. I've found the following categories are the most relevant to my creative work, and using them makes it easier to get started.

### — Who You Are

*“I am larger and better than I thought. I did not think I held so much goodness.”*

WALT WHITMAN

We all have internal qualities that influence how we interact with the world around us. Some of these qualities make us uniquely suited for a particular role or project. Some qualities reflect limits, telling us where our energy will likely be drained, wasted, or both.

We contain multitudes, and we're always changing and growing, so think of this exercise as taking a rough snapshot in time rather than coming up with something that defines you perfectly and permanently. In addition to these prompts, you can also use a personality framework to explore facets of yourself you may not even be aware of. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Enneagram are both useful for catalyzing self-exploration.



### ***My strengths are...***

*I am deeply passionate.*

*I'm very curious and constantly learning.*

*Little things inspire me, and I love to take something I'm discovering in one area and combine it with something I'm curious about in another area.*

*When I'm inspired, I'm fantastic at inspiring others.*

*I'm really good at starting new projects and getting people excited about them.*

*I love constantly iterating and making things better.*

*I communicate really well in writing.*

*I am intensely compassionate and a good person to share both pain and joy with.*

*I know myself really well, and that self-knowledge is a constant source of growth.*

*I'm a loyal and generous friend to people who I feel I can trust.*

*I'm highly self-motivated and can figure out how to do anything I really want to do.*

### ***The shadow side of my strengths are...***

*I feel negative feelings just as strongly as positive ones.*

*I'm very hard on myself when I don't live up to my ideals.*

*When I'm feeling down, my default response is to turn on myself and isolate from others.*

*I find it challenging to keep up momentum for maintaining existing projects.*

*I'm very sensitive to the feelings and social dynamics in a room, which often makes me awkward and overwhelmed in groups of people.*

*I'm tender-hearted, and my feelings are hurt easily. I usually blame myself for it, even if someone legitimately hurts me.*

*I course-correct quickly as I receive new inspiration and learn new information, which can be frustrating for people who work with me.*

*It's hard for me to get motivated to work on anything that isn't deeply connecting with my ideals.*

***I am nourished by...***

*One on one conversations (especially while taking a walk)*

*Time and space and encouragement when strong feelings come up*

*Self-acceptance*

*Freedom and flexibility in my schedule*

*Lots of books*

*Lots of paper, pens, and ink*

*Lots of hugs and kind, true words*

*Sunshine and the outdoors*

*Warm blankets*

*Chopping vegetables*

*Good food and a warm drink*

***I am currently growing by...***

*I'm becoming more accepting of the parts of myself I've always been ashamed of*

*I'm becoming less afraid of what other people think of me*

*I'm learning to be honest about my feelings, even when it's scary*

*I'm learning to notice when I'm taking something personally or when my inner critic is running the show (and sometimes even turn those thoughts around)*

*I'm learning how to show up again in my writing and in my life*

## — Time

*“It’s not the load that breaks you down, it’s  
the way you carry it.”*

LENA HORNE

I am a hoarder of time. The bits at the end of the day, the bits at the beginning, any bits that happen to land in the middle — I am always on the lookout for scraps to bury away from prying eyes. I’m not sure what experience in my life made me look at time as if I were a beggar scrounging for it (probably self-employment), but it has stuck with me. I have to remind myself that the people in my life are worth far more than the clock.

When I take inventory of Time, I think of it in two ways — the time I have, and how I would prefer to spend it.

*I make up my own hours now*

*Giving me all the power for making each day  
great*

*And all the responsibility when my days are  
a disaster*

*I invent my own structure*

*The kind of structure that allows me to be  
free*

*Every day I have one Most Important Thing*

*In each of several areas*

*A Most Important Project*

*A Most Important Class I’m Taking*

*A Most Important Book I'm Reading*

*A Most Important Question I'm Trying to Answer*

*A Most Important Thing That's Bringing Me Joy*

*It removes the decision-making*

*And allows me to be fluid*

*While spending time on my priorities*

*And not on other things*

My answers are free-form, because my time is free-form at the moment. If your time is more structured, it might be helpful to write out your daily routine, like this:

*6am: Wake up, shower*

*6:30am: Get kids dressed, breakfasted*

*7:30am: Kids on bus, I'm on the road*

*8am-12pm: Work*

*12pm-1pm: Lunch*

*1pm-5pm: Work*

*5pm: On the road again (break out into song)*

*5:15pm-5:45pm: Pick up groceries, or whatever*

*6pm: Cook, if it's my turn; help with homework, if it's my turn*

*7pm: Dinner*

*8pm-9:30pm: Time for creative work*

*9:30pm-11pm: Books, bed, forever*

*(This feels like a lot)*

*I would like to be more in control of my time*

*Still somewhat structured, but more time for  
the things I want to pursue*

*How to make this happen???*

Now that I'm leading a team of people, it's not only helpful for me to think about my own time, but about the time available on my team.

*Our project manager is at capacity*

*Our designers are between 50-75% at  
capacity in any given week*

*Our developer time is 100% spoken for*

*Until September*

*Our growth team is at capacity with internal  
work,*

*Building our own platform and voice*

*But can be re-directed to client work*

*When the opportunity arises*

*I'm 100% at capacity,*

*Needing to stay focused on this book*

*And then That Book*

*And Those Classes*

*And Key Relationships*

*And our vision*

## — Money

*“I love money. I love everything about it. I bought some pretty good stuff. Got me a \$300 pair of socks. Got a fur sink. An electric dog polisher. A gasoline powered turtleneck sweater. And, of course, I bought some dumb stuff, too.”*

STEVE MARTIN

You do not need a lot of money to start creating and gathering people around your work. In fact, a lack of money helps you focus your energy on creating something that can sustain itself. If you have too much money to throw at a problem in the beginning, it's often harder to focus on solutions that will work financially, because the money part isn't urgent for you.

So if you have no money to speak of, don't worry; I actually think this is a good thing. Plenty of people have created their work with nothing but lint in their pockets, and plenty will continue to do so.

When I'm taking inventory of Money, I think of it in two ways — the money I have to work with, and what it costs me to keep going.

*Our team has a six-month runway if we land  
no new client projects*

*We have a monthly gap of \$35,000 we need  
to fill*

*Somehow.*

*We're in the middle of a pandemic*

*So we're avoiding making new hires*

*Or investing lots of cash*

*But we can make smaller investments in our  
growth*

*Here and there*

*And we have excellent relationships with  
quality contractors*

*So we can scale flexibly without increasing  
payroll*

If you're working with your own personal cash, you might list the different accounts you have, and the amounts in each account. You could also list loans you could get, or money that's getting ready to be available to you. (These numbers are fiction, just to give you an idea.)

*Monthly disposable income (money I can  
actually use for things other than living):  
\$300*

*Personal account: \$8,500*

*Savings account: \$6,000*

*Upcoming tax refund: ~\$5,000*



*401(k): \$15,500*

*Available credit cards: \$16,000*

*Could get a business loan*

*Never tried, but it's possible*

*Could get a loan from my parents*

*I need to make \$5,500 a month minimum to cover costs of living*

*If I quit my job, we would be okay for 4 months*

## — Interests

*“Everybody is interesting when they are interested in something.”*

AMY POEHLER

The things we care about not only make us human; they make us who we are. They serve both to identify us as individuals and to help us identify the people around us who are like-minded in some way. And they bring us joy, which is the whole point.

My middle name is Joy, and I wonder if the reason for that is because it's a lifelong lesson I need to learn: how to prioritize joy, and make it non-negotiable. I can get so focused on the practical parts of my life that I forget to pay attention to what lights me up. It is easy to put off joy for later — when I have more time and less stress. But later rarely happens. There is always going to be some chaos in my life making it difficult for me to enjoy this moment.

I've often heard that to find what gives us joy, we need to think about what we liked to do as children. That's a good exercise, but it's not especially helpful for me. I was a serious child, focusing more on what was expected of me than on what I really wanted.

Instead, I like to think about the concept of taking a really long vacation. What would I do if I had a year to myself? What if I had unlimited resources, and I could spend it however I wanted? Here's my list:

*I would spend my time reading*

*And writing down the things I learn*

*Or the things that move me*

*Every kind of book*

*Fiction, non-fiction*

*Classic, contemporary*

*Every kind*

*I would also learn and make new things*

*Whatever I was reading about*

*Painting, cooking, birdhouse-making,  
having dinner parties, star-gazing*

*Whatever*

*I would take my family with me on the same  
adventure*

*Reading every kind of book*

*Learning new things, always*

*We would go to the theater to see plays*

*We would watch good movies  
And play lots of games that make us think  
and laugh  
We would eat delicious food, making most of  
it, ordering some of it  
And we would dress-up in costumes for fun  
Making them ourselves sometimes  
We would be surrounded with books to the  
ceiling  
And all kinds of creative tools and materials  
We would each have a treehouse  
Individual treehouses, that connect  
We would have a garden  
Someone else would do the weeding  
And the cleaning*

If remembering childhood helps you to think more along these lines, your list might look something like:

*I remember walking  
With my dad  
And doing logic problems  
Building forts to create a space just for me  
Writing plays for my stuffed animals  
And reading, reading, reading  
Riding bikes, exploring*

*Making up ghost stories at the rock quarry*

*Loving my homework*

*Even though no one else did*

## — Skills

*“The thing is to become a master and in your old age to acquire the courage to do what children did when they knew nothing.”*

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

We all have a natural aptitude for certain things. Singing and performing on stage are both pursuits I always remember being good at. I first realized this when I played Betsy Ross in the second grade class play and my teacher Mrs. Taylor said, “Sarah, you were born to be an actress.” She ran into my parents at a fair in my hometown 25 years later, and told them that exact same story.

And yet, acting and singing are not what I chose to pursue. I thought about it, but it never lined up with the life I wanted to live. As a result, I’m pretty good at performing in local theatre, but I don’t have the edge of a professional.

On the other hand, there are some skills I have honed through intense effort. I have achieved a kind of mastery that makes it difficult to explain to anyone else, because the mastery is in the nuances and details of the work. Big picture creative strategy is one of these things. Learning and assimilating new information is another. Short-form non-fiction writing is another.

And then there are the skills that fall somewhere in between. Long-form writing is one example (this book is my first, and second, attempt, and something I hope to spend more of my career mastering). Then there is teaching and mentorship. Storytelling. Front-end web development.

When I'm done thinking through my different levels of mastery, my list might look something like this:

***I am naturally good at...***

*Reading*

*Writing*

*Singing*

*Acting*

*Making up stories*

*Inspiring people*

***I have really honed my skills at...***

*Creative strategy*

*Short-form writing*

*Learning and assimilating new information*

*Sharing what I've learned*

*Cooking*

***I am also skilled at...***

*Coming up with new ideas and getting them started*

*Front-end web development*

*Copywriting*

*Drawing*

***I want to hone my skills of...***

*Leadership*

*Long-form writing*

***The world would be a better place if I never had to...***

*Be responsible for the daily operation and maintenance of an existing endeavor*

*Meet a regular, recurring deadline*

*Do the same thing every day*

*Do something that doesn't require a rapid pace of learning, growth, and constant improvement*

## — Experiences & Perspectives

*“I have heard mothers tell of the long night with their firstborn when they were afraid that they and the baby might die. And I have heard my grandmother speak of her first ball when she was seventeen. And they were all, when their souls grew warm, poets.”*

RAY BRADBURY

Our unique experiences and perspectives form us and make it possible to do our creative work in the way that only we can. A clerical friend of mine has said that we often want what someone else has — their ability to speak in public or sing on a stage or whatever it is they do with seeming effortlessness. But would we be willing to live the life they’ve lived that gave them the perspective to be able to do that?

It’s not about doing the hard work, necessarily (though that’s part of it). It’s about living through the hard and wonderful things that shape who we are and the type of work we are able to create.

The brilliance of any creative work is not only in the things we see — the flawless execution and the relentless pursuit of getting better. It’s even more in the things we don’t see...the nuances of a person’s gifts that are the fingerprint of their genius. Those nuances are brought about through the pain and joy of living. Our experiences, both terrible and wonderful, give us our unique and invaluable perspective that has the potential of making anything we create feel like magic.

When I'm taking inventory of Experiences & Perspectives, I think about the pivotal moments in my life and the perspective those moments have given me. I like to break it up into different stages of my life to make it easier.

***When I was a kid, I...***

*Was born an over-achiever*

*Grew up in a neighborhood where our house was broken into numerous times*

*Went to kindergarten where I was hated for my white privilege, which was hard to understand as a five year old*

*Ate lunch in the bathroom every day*

*Learned what it's like to be an outsider*

*Decided I never wanted other people to feel like that*

*Broke my femur bone, was put in a full body cast and homeschooled (yay?)*

*Moved a few times after that*

*Was often shy and scared of people*

*Which made me lonely, quite a lot*

***When I was a teenager, I...***

*Moved again*

*Shy and scared again*

*Fell in love with technology*

*Developed social anxiety*



*Hid under the stairs at school*

*Missed 37 days*

*Lots of shame because of it*

*Graduated as an over-achiever anyway*

*Married my first husband 21 days after I  
turned 18*

*Moved again*

***When I was a young adult, I...***

*Was married*

*And broke*

*And in college*

*And working full time*

*The Internet was young, and fun for me*

*Became a better web developer*

*Was frustrated by my poor design skills*

*Started de-constructing the work of my  
heroes so I could learn*

*Had my first child*

*Started designing websites freelance*

*Discovered content-driven design*

*Became one of the first in my industry to  
design this way*

*And to talk about it*

*Had second child*

*Hired first employees*

*Was terrible at being a boss*

*Did it anyway*

*Started experimenting with my theories  
about nation-building*

*Had third child*

*Started homeschooling*

***When I was a bit of an older adult, I...***

*Went out on my own again*

*(No more being a boss)*

*Started teaching what I've learned about  
building communities*

*Started writing a book, too*

*Was hired by one of my clients*

*Learned a lot about collaboration and  
leadership*

*Was laid off*

*Finished writing this book*

***Over the past few years, I...***

*Built up my consulting business with my  
book proceeds*

*Invested in becoming a partner the company  
I was laid off from*

*Moved across the country to the west coast*

*Got a divorce*

*Married my business partner*

*Our exes married each other*

*Now we have 5 kids*

*And 4 co-parents*

*And life is pretty magical*

*But also like a weird Hallmark movie*

*I became CEO of &yet*

*Repositioned our team to support people in  
their growth*

*And here we are*

Looking over it now, I realize there has been quite a bit of pain that has brought about who I am today, and the form my work has taken. Maybe more than is usual (or maybe not? Maybe we all think our lives are unusually hard?). Even so, pivotal moments do not have to be painful, or monumental. They can be small realizations that happened gradually. They can be words of encouragement from someone you trust or admire. They can be moments when you were at your absolute happiest. Whatever has brought you closer to who you are right now is an experience worth writing down.

## — Relationships

*“Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another: ‘What! You too? I thought I was the only one.’”*

C.S. LEWIS

My partner in work and in life Adam Avenir has taught me so much about the joy of creating with other people. Collaboration is not about glorifying the work you do (even though you love it). It’s about the people you get to work with and create for, and the relationships that are forged when you solve hard problems together.

Even if we are working independently, our lives are so much better when we get this. As fun and satisfying as creative work is, the richness of our lives comes not through our work, but through our relationships. The more we use our work to deepen our relationships and bring people closer together, the more fulfilled we will be.

Not only that, but almost every new opportunity comes to us through people. The possibility we see in front of us seems fixed and static until we meet that person who opens our eyes to something new. The more we open up ourselves and our work to being affected by other people, the better our work will be, and the more opportunities we will have for growth.

I’m not going to list all of the individuals in my life (that would be tedious reading), but here is my list, based on the type of relationships I have. You can list people in general, but it will be even more useful if you list at least some of them by name.

*My incredibly creative, compassionate  
husband*

*Our 5 thoughtful, hilarious, crazy-creative  
kids*

*My wise and loving parents*

*My best friends*

*My community on the internet*

*My web designer/developer friends*

*My software developer friends*

*My business-minded friends*

*Our local art & business community*

*My intellectual friends*

*My internet-famous friends*

*My friends who live in big cities*

*My international friends*

*My childhood friends*

*My friends from past jobs and creative  
projects*

*My former clients*

*My former students*

*My mentors (whether they know they're my  
mentors or not)*

*My heroes*

*The people I want to be when I grow up*

## — Bodies of work

*“The artist is nothing without the gift, but the gift is nothing without the work.”*

ÉMILE ZOLA

You may have written a book, drawn a collection of illustrations, written a thousand blog posts, made pottery, designed websites, built a business, or shipped some software. Whatever it is, whether you’re proud of it or completely over it, it is informing whatever you do tomorrow.

I have a bad habit of ignoring work I’ve created in the past, mostly because I’m future-oriented, and it’s natural for me to ignore what I’ve already done while I imagine possibilities for the future. There’s also a significant part of me that feels embarrassed by my old work. Even things I created a year ago look so flawed to me now because of how much I’ve grown creatively during that timeframe.

After years of boarding up my old work every time I move on to something new, I now regret having thrown away much of it. I know I could go back and find the components of a lot of the work and re-create it, but doing so would take me away from what is *now*. Instead, I am making a better effort to honor what I have done in the past and overcome the urge to move on so quickly and completely.

Some of us have more of a problem with moving on; rather than ignoring our past work, we hold onto it too tightly, either because we’ve invested a lot of time into building it, or because we feel it defines us in some way.

But sometimes what we've done in the past holds us back from the person we're becoming and the work we're meant to create in the future.

For me, these are often the projects I feel pressured to do, because other people are expecting me to do them. It's hard to let them go, because I have created an expectation, and I imagine that expectation to be so much bigger and more important than it really is.

When I'm taking inventory of Bodies of Work, I look at both of these things — the projects I'm holding on tightly to, and the projects I have possibly forgotten that helped get me where I am today. Acknowledging both helps me make connections in how I might use some of that past work to propel me in a direction that is truer to who I am in this moment.

**S.Joy Studios:** *The web design consultancy I founded in 2005. It was my first company, and I'm proud of the hundreds of clients I worked with, single-handedly at first, and everything I learned the hard way.*

**LiteSites:** *A done-for-you customized web design product I created in 2007. It was my first break-through product and helped me produce my first \$250,000 year, which was a big deal for me as a one-person company.*

**MaTweeps:** *A website I created in 2009 interviewing the people I liked best on Twitter. I got to know a lot of really cool people that way.*

**The Gold-Digging Excursion:** *An online program I created in 2009 that helped people to find the “gold” hidden in their websites. This was my first online class, and I’m super proud of how fun and weird it was. The sales strategy was the most interesting and successful of any of my endeavors.*

**Hot Dates with Your Website:** *An online program I created in 2010 where my customers’ websites would take them on a “date” every week to improve their relationship. It was my first recurring product and brought in \$15,000 per month from the very beginning, something I totally took for granted at the time. My favorite part was putting together “romantic” mixtapes that only a website could come up with.*

**Web Designer Wakeup Call:** *A product I created in 2010 to help web designers create different revenue streams that aligned with who they were and what they wanted to be doing.*

**Tour de Bliss:** *An online program I created in 2011 that helped people grow their businesses online in a way that felt true to themselves and the life they wanted to create. This was really solving a problem for myself. I was burned out, and I wanted work to be fun again. So I created an online getaway where students traveled via hot*



*air balloon to all of these imaginary theme park-esque places. It was both insane and amazing.*

**A Small Nation:** *The marketing company I founded in 2011 where we partnered with founders to build new communities, creating them out loud in public, from the ground up. Even though the vision was ultimately too ambitious, I am proud of our team and the interesting work we did together.*

**The 90-Minute Work Day:** *A productivity program that I created and used for many years to heal from burnout and be productive again.*

**Discover Your National Identity:** *A digital book my team created in 2012 that helped people learn how to use design, photography, and video to create a strong, unforgettable brand. This was my first time collaborating on a product with a team. I'm the most proud of the sales page we wrote for it, where we became characters in a book, dressed up in costumes, and had hilarious conversations about the fact that we were selling a \$360 digital book—"Is it covered in gold?!"*

**Water Your Enthusiasm:** *A website I created in 2012 that asked the question "What do you want to be excited about?" and then gave you talks, music, books, and other resources based on your answer.*

**The Year of the Nation:** *A weekly digital publication that took you through a year of nation-building.*

**Hello, Month:** *A website project I created in the middle of being deeply depressed where I would write myself letters every single day to make each month better than the one before it.*

**Call of the Wildling:** *The first ambitious, weird online project I created with the &yet team. It used story, music, and reflection to take people on a journey in pursuit of their own uniqueness. We made it to help our friends deal with the pain of burnout and the pressures of modern creative life.*

**Gather the People:** *This book! The book that helped me capture the evolution of my approach on paper. It's also apparently the first product I've made that wasn't completely ridiculous.*

**Gather the Courage:** *A guided journaling exercise our team at &yet made during the pandemic to help creative leaders to reflect, be encouraged, and make courageous decisions.*

**Wegotchu.cards:** *A fun side project our team created so you can pass around a digital card for everyone to sign, even when you're not together.*

**To Build A Swing:** *A podcast Adam and I started together, about all the things we think about on our walks*

**My next book:** *Who knows what this will be called. We originally called it Gather the People for Teams, but then realized it's a totally different book and needs a new title. It's based around a customer relationships framework I created that makes the foundational concepts in this book more useful for leaders of teams.*

## — Ideas

*“How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it.”*

VIRGINIA WOOLF

I like to keep track of my ideas, just in case I ever have time again to make them happen. As I've created more work (and realized how much it actually takes to maintain it), I create less new work and focus more on finding ways to expand on what I am already doing. However, it's still important for me to make space for side projects: things I do just because I want to do them, and for no other reason. It keeps me fresh, motivated, and helps me make new discoveries for the projects I'm already committed to.

I have a running list of ideas, so I don't need to stop and take inventory. But every once in a while, when I am not at all in danger of dropping my current projects to start something new, I will take a peek. Just a tiny peek.

*That novel I've been thinking about for years*

*A class on self-differentiated leadership that leads you to build your own "house" that represents the place you want to lead from and the things you need in order to do that*

*Miniature houses of locations in classic books that I love (Anna Karenina, Great Expectations, Wuthering Heights, etc.), including miniature people, miniature furniture, miniature food, miniature transportation, miniature everything*

*An art creation space (maybe a treehouse?), where people could come and have all the tools, materials, education, and inspiration at hand to do their art. It would be like a co-working space, except for artists. And there would be a special center for children, which would provide childcare for working artists, while also allowing the children to have a space to create their own work. Part of the proceeds would go toward sponsoring use of the space for underprivileged artists.*

*Gather the Courage: a book that helps you get the mental/emotional space you need to lead authentically*

My idea list is rather short, since I've discarded most of the ideas I know I will never do. Yours might take pages and pages. Writing them all down will help give you a picture of all the possible roads you could take in your work (and perhaps will help you prioritize future projects).

## Seeing the possibility in what we already have

Taking inventory of our resources helps us start connecting dots. We may not connect them immediately, but having awareness of what we have to work with ignites our brain's natural tendency toward pattern recognition. What we think about, we begin to see everywhere.

When I decided to finish this book, it suddenly seemed like everyone was writing a book. Every article in my Twitter feed was about the writing process. Every talk I watched seemed to specifically mention writing, or was related to my book in some way. Did everyone suddenly decide they wanted to become an author? Is 'writing' suddenly every blogger's topic of choice? Of course not. My attention was focused in that direction because of my experience.

This is how epiphanies happen. We start thinking about something, and then everything we see starts to be relevant to our ideas. This is why I love the human brain. We can take one idea and add another completely different idea, and suddenly those two ideas combine to form an epiphany. I live for those epiphanies — those moments when I'm standing in the shower, and suddenly, I know exactly what to do next. It is exhilarating, and my brain goes into hyper-creative mode. I have all the energy there ever was to make it happen.

We are not going to depend solely on you having an epiphany before you start creating your work. What we're going to do instead is figure out how to use what you

already have to get what you need in a way that aligns with what you want in your life. Epiphanies welcome, but optional.