

gather
the
people



SARAH J. BRAY

Preview

When I'm making something, I put my whole heart into it. But that's not the hard part. The hard part is getting other people to care about it without feeling like I'm compromising who I am. That's what this book is about.

When I wrote the first edition almost two years ago, I was deeply honored by the number of people who told me how much it helped them. I've included some of their thoughts so you can get a sense for how it might be beneficial to you, too. I'm now finalizing the second edition that includes a lot of things I've learned since then.

Want to pre-order the book? You'll get a better deal, and it helps me know how many to print. Pre-orders will ship and be available for download on February 1st.

You can pre-order at
gatherthepeople.com/work-in-progress

I just finished reading Gather the People in one big gulp, at last—and loved it. It's helping me feel ready (excited, even) for the launch of my new site and identity. "What is most true for me right now?", and the questions that follow, are so golden in their evergreenness. And all the many lists give me such a window into your world as it was when you wrote the book. I experienced them as deeply generous.

Thank you for being consistent and setting an example of gentleness + ambition—all the loops and cycles it takes to begin, over and over again.

— Diana Berlin

I recommend, once again, Sarah Bray's Gather the People. A great takeaway from the book is the exercise of asking yourself what you want...but then WHY you want it.

— Laura Holway

I read your book on the plane! MIND. BLOWN. I love this!

—Shenee Howard

Gather the People feels like it was written just for me, for this very moment in my life. ;_;

—William Van Hecke

I spent most of the morning reading and am so IN LOVE! More in love with a business book than I have been in a long time. And I like business books! But i LOVE Sarah J. Bray :) Thank you for a GREAT read!

— Melanie Mauer

I started reading Gather the People and couldn't put it down. I felt like the author, Sarah Bray, was speaking right to my heart. So of course, I stayed up late to finish it. It's basically about not making things in a vacuum, which is just the kick in the pants I needed. Although I know that well when it comes to helping other people with their products and companies, I think I had lost sight of it for my own creative work. I realized there are so many things I've been thinking about making (or writing, mainly). Why not just write them, put them in the world, and see if anything resonates?

— Lisa Sanchez

I recommend, once again, Sarah Bray's Gather the People. A great takeaway from the book is the exercise of asking yourself what you want...but then WHY you want it.

— Laura Holway

You're one of the most conscious, introspective writers-about-business I know. I love how you create an intimate setting for sharing your truth and how useful your insights are!

— Nathalie Lussier

I don't think I have ever known anybody as creative and loving as you. Not creative. Not loving. Creative-and-loving, like it's one word. Over the years, I watch your projects and I'm so impressed by how YOU you are, every single time. You give and you give and you give and you give and you just don't freaking quit, and the world is nicer because you are in it. Thank you for making Gather The People, thank you for staying you all these years, and thank you for the inspiration.

We printed your book and then printed it again so we wouldn't have to share a copy. (Our highlights were starting to compete, and we fight when that happens. Best to just avoid the whole thing.) It was a real inspiration for change, and I've recommended it to three clients already. Well done, my dear.

— Naomi Dunford

WOW is this an embodiment of SO MUCH of what makes you AMAZING and AWESOME and OTHER ALL-CAPS things!!!!

— Dan Blank

This is going to go down as one of the most important books on my mental shelf. I'm going to come back to it over and over and over again.

— Adam Brault

I just wanted to say thank you so much for writing Gather The People. I've been a silent reader of your emails since right before the Tour de Bliss and I have always appreciated and enjoyed how human your writing is — useful and personal at the same time. And I always wondered how you told such lovely stories and made it look so effortless.

I've definitely found myself in the position of the maker who's worked silently behind the scenes and then released stuff to crickets because the idea of doing a whole big launch is just kinda off-putting to me because it feels like the focus is on me and not them.

I really appreciate the concept of bringing people along on the journey and how clearly you outline that process. I already have a flag in the ground and a wee mailing list, so I'm going to be shifting how I approach my communications going forward.

Thank you so much for writing an ebook that not only changed my thinking but it is also incredibly practical. It really is the best ebook I've ever purchased.

— Miki DeVivo

Thank you deeply for summoning the courage to write with kindness and compassion and open-handed transparency — in an industry where a lot of “leaders” give off a saccharine pump-you-up kind of vibe that I can't hang with, it was just really refreshing to read a thoughtful work from someone who's been in the self-employed internetz trenches for a substantial time and has her heart and wits fully intact.

— Carolyn Elliott

Gather the People

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

Sarah J. Bray

“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



I WROTE THIS BOOK TWO AND A HALF YEARS AGO. Since then, so much has changed, and while the principles and strategies within it have not, I've learned that implementing them is another story. It's one thing to consult with a client through the process; it's another to live it out yourself.

With this new edition of *Gather the People*, I want to not only share with you what I've learned about approaching marketing in a more human way, I also want to explore how it challenges us to overcome obstacles that are less "out there" and more inside our hearts.

When I wrote the first edition of this book, I had just been laid off from &yet, a design and software consultancy I had fallen in love with for their genuine love and care for people. Working with them changed the way I thought about the type of impact I wanted to have in the world. Prior to that, I had been an independent researcher and consultant for 9 years, having owned my own design and marketing agency at one point. I never imagined working for anyone but myself. But after meeting the people at &yet, I just wanted to be in their orbit for as long as they'd let me.

Alas, life being what it is, we lost our biggest contract that year and had to shut down the fledgling marketing division I was hired to lead less than a year prior. After that, I gave myself 90 days to finish writing the book I had been mulling over for years. 90 days until the money ran out, and I could no longer pay my rent (which was at that time, pretty exorbitant). I shared the preview of what I was writing with my community, took pre-orders, and got to work, using the strategies I've laid out in this book to give the project the support it needed to be a success.

Thankfully, it worked. Not only did I sell enough copies to give myself a solid runway to work on my next project (an online program to help people implement these principles in their own work), but I filled my calendar with consulting projects. Before long, I had a waiting list.

Things were going well, but I was no longer at a point in my career where I wanted to work alone, and &yet was still on my heart. Amazingly, a little over a year ago, I got the opportunity to join the team again, this time as a partner in the company. There was no question—I had to do it. And now, I get to explore a whole new layer of this work with some of my favorite people in the world.

It would be great if that was the whole story, everything wrapped in a nice little bow at the end. But of course, it isn't. About a year ago, social media stopped being a safe place for me when someone in my community started pursuing me obsessively. Then six months after that, some really hard things happened in my personal life, and I shrunk back from sharing online completely. "Creating out loud" (one of the principles we'll talk about in later chapters) became next to impossible.

Showing up online has always been hard, especially for people who are underrepresented, marginalized, or just have really big hearts. When you're doing creative work that is personal, risky, and goes against the norm, it's even harder. I hope the second edition of this book will not only give you the why and the how of marketing in a more human way, but will also give you strategies for continuing to do so during times when everything in you is fighting against being seen.

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. Sometimes I even get to be one of them, encouraging others with the potential I see around me. But as inspiring as someone with creative vision may be, seeing new possibility and making it real is hard and lonely work.

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 a primitive, unformed and frankly very bloody mess. 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.

Unfortunately, it's not enough for one person with vision to nurture an idea and help it grow. Whether we're working independently or with a team, we need the support of others so it can develop into something that can stand on its own. At the very least, we need people to understand it, to push back against it, to encourage us as we make it, to buy it, to use it, to tell others about it, and ultimately to help us make it better.

I'm writing this book from the perspective of someone who has spent over a decade helping 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” was that these words make us biased toward the outcome — this new world being created. We focus on building the assets that will make the nation function and sustain itself. The air-tight business plan. The brand that people adore. The story behind it all. The well-designed website. The top-rated content. 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 we have the people is like building sidewalks before we see where the people actually walk — we end up with a lot of unused sidewalks, and a lot of muddy paths criss-crossing to bypass them.

There is a beautiful marketplace in the city I used to live in called Waterside. It is, as you would expect, right on the river, and it’s full of light and art and beauty. It is also basically a ghost town. No one goes there.

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

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.

This isn't easy, of course. It means changing the way we think about our creative process and broadening our definition of "collaborator" to include the people we're creating for. It means admitting, in public, that we don't know things. A lot of things. It requires a willingness to say, "Oh hey, you know that thing I said I was doing last week? Well, I discovered this new thing this week, and now it's going in a totally different direction." And it requires an openness to receiving feedback while we're still in the middle of making something, and honestly evaluating that feedback while not losing the clarity of our vision.

But it's worth it. Not only will we have made something better than we dreamed, but we won't 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 process.

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. If you find yourself struggling or in the midst of failure...

You learn nothing from your successes except to think too much of yourself. It is from failure that all growth comes, provided you can recognize it, admit it, learn from it, rise above it, and then try again.

—Dee Hock

Every major leap forward in my life has happened after a truly painful experience. Having to put groceries on a credit card goaded me into starting my first business over a decade ago. The pain of an overloaded client schedule and the loneliness of working alone pushed me to build a team, even though I had no confidence in my leadership skills. The agonizing defeat of a business failure that led to me laying off dear friends and collaborators pushed me to hone in on what I really wanted to do with my work and life. The

jarring experience of getting laid off myself forced me to ship the first version of this book in 7 weeks and put my money where my mouth was in living and breathing the things I'm sharing in this book.

The many bumps and bruises on that path of self-discovery eventually led me to where I am now, leading strategy for our team at &yet, a design and software consultancy that works with compassionate companies on a wide range of projects, from developing realtime communications software to designing high impact conference experiences.

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. No matter where you are now, any less-than-ideal circumstances can 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 are working on one thing, you are 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 hope the tools in this book will 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 new possibility for you.

Chapter 1: 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, building a business, making music, developing software, designing an experience, or any other creative pursuit, we all share this struggle. There are distractions, we'd rather be watching television, 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 creators.

But as hard as that is, most of us struggle even more with 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? Not even close.

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. (If you were reading a Serious Business Book, right here's where you'd see the story of BetaMax losing even though VHS was inferior technology.)

Of course, most of us aren't attempting to be a world-renowned artist or competing for shelf space at Walmart. 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 muddied 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?

Julianne, one of the first people I ever hired, helped sear this lesson into my brain. We'd get together for a brainstorming session, and because I was so aware of the financial and other practical needs of the project, I would discard any idea that would threaten those needs. 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.

Although making work that is widely adopted and loved requires collaboration, it withers in conditions of co-dependency. We cannot rely on other people to be the source of validation for us and our work. Our work is what it is, regardless of the malleable opinions of others, and we must learn to know the truth of what it is for ourselves. Feedback helps make our work better, but the final truth is in our bones, and we have to learn to trust it.

Good marketing will save us...maybe

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 us and our work look legitimate, hoping it will help people to understand and care about our work. 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 and quantity of the marketing (or maybe a little of both), that means we just have to keep working harder at what we've been doing. And sure, that'll probably get us where we want to go, eventually. But I believe there's another solution.

When I first became an employer, I was 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.

It wasn't until I started working with my business partner, Adam Brault, that I started to understand what I had been doing wrong. One of the first things I noticed about his approach was that he never started by announcing "this is what we're going to do". Instead, he had a vague notion of what he thought we might do, and then he started having conversations with people about it, genuinely curious about what they thought about it and how their ideas might improve it. Every person he'd talk to would help shape the idea in some way until it was concrete enough to share with everyone and officially get started.

Through watching this process, I learned that shared ownership is powerful. People are committed to what they help create, and they often come up with creative solutions that work far better than anything we would have tried. Then we're not trying to push our ideas onto other people; instead, people are working 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 better at relationships in general). 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?

I started testing my theory in my own work and in my work with others, and I slowly discovered that collaborating not only helps get people to care, 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

As a business owner, I've long been aware of the need for getting people to care about my work, but I've also resisted following most marketing advice; it always seemed so disingenuous and incongruent with who I am as a person. Because of that, I've spent much of my time figuring out strategies that help me get support for my work in a way that aligns with my values, personality, and goals. I then developed those ideas into strategies that I've used to help several hundred clients create sustainable marketing systems that are not only effective, but that feel good and true to their vision for the kind of impact they want to have.

I've tried to make the following framework as simple and strategic as possible, while also sharing practical tactics that anyone can apply to any creative project. 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.

In the beginning, you'll be 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're able to effectively serve others, we have to start with ourselves.

Next, you'll be deciding 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 to your community, and then use what you learn from that process to release it to the public 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 a few 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.

As you work your way through each concept, I would love to get your thoughts, questions, and what you've been learning on your own about this kind of approach. Please say hello and email me your thoughts at sarah@andyet.com.

My hope for this book and the strategies within it is that it 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 not as far away as you think. All you need to do is begin.

Chapter 2: Taking Inventory



We are called upon to do something new, to confront a no man's land, to push into a forest where there are no well-worn paths and from which no one has returned to guide us. This is what the existentialists call the anxiety of nothingness. To live into the future means to leap into the unknown, and this requires a degree of courage for which there is no immediate precedent and which few people realize.

—Rollo May, *The Courage to Create*

IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS CHAOS. It's a creative pattern embedded in nearly every origin story ever told, older than the written word. We may think creative work starts with a blank canvas, but what we're really dealing with is a jumble of potential that only looks like blankness to the outside observer. We know the truth; it's 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's 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.

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 (yes, 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 notice options where you used to see limits and inspiration where you used to see a blank canvas. If you're not sure what you want to make next, it's a good 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

Who You Are

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

—Walt Whitman

Every single resource we have is useful within a specific context—who we are as people. We all have inherent qualities that define how we interact with the world around us. Some of these qualities give us capabilities that make us uniquely suited for a particular role or project. Some give us limits that tell 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 a deeper understanding of yourself.

Prompts for reflection:

- What do you see as your best qualities? How would your best friend describe you?
- What do you see as the shadow side of your strengths?
- What are things you want and need on a regular basis to be the best version of yourself?
- How are you currently growing and changing?

My answers:

Throughout this book, I'll be doing these exercises along with you to give you an idea of how you might apply your own thinking. Sometimes I make lists, sometimes I free-write, sometimes I just think about something for a moment and move on. Feel free to answer in whatever way is most useful to you.

What do you see as your best qualities? How would your best friend describe you?

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 like I

can trust.

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

What do you see as the shadow side of your strengths?

*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 myself from others.

I'm really bad at 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 change direction 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.

What are things you want and need on a regular basis to be the best version of yourself?

One on one conversations

Meaningful relationships where each of us feels safe sharing our whole selves

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

How are you currently growing and changing?

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

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. My friend Rick Hocker 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 doing this exercise, think about the pivotal moments in your life and the perspective those moments have given you. I like to break it up into different stages to make it easier.

Prompts for reflection:

- What experiences formed you as a kid?
- As a teenager?
- As a young adult?
- At various stages of adulthood?
- Over the past few years?

My answers:

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 universally hated for my white privilege

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 never had to go to that school again

Moved a few times after that

Was often shy and scared of people, hich 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 and missed 37 days of school

Had lots of shame

Graduated as an over-achiever anyway

Got married 22 days after I turned 18

Moved again

When I was a young adult, I...

Was 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 a web design studio

Discovered content-driven design

*Became one of the first in my industry to design this way
and to share what I was learning*

Had second child

Hired first employees

Was terrible at being a boss

Did it anyway

*Started experimenting with new marketing theories that
were in alignment with my personality*

Had third child

Went out on my own again

Started writing a book based on all I'd learned

Was hired by one of my clients

Learned a lot about collaboration and leadership

Was laid off

Finished writing the first version of this book

Built up my client base to better than it was before

Created a program based on the book

Despite my resilience, I still felt lonely and wanted to work with a team again

Over the past few years, I...

Re-joined & yet as partner

Had some disturbing experiences on the Internet

Quit social media

Moved across the country

Wanted to feel inspired, safe, and encouraged online again

Helped start the Leadershippy community

Have continued developing my ideas and research around communities and marketing

Now I'm re-learning how to show up online and in my writing and teaching again

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

Working with &yet 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.

Prompts for reflection:

- Who inspires you? Who do you learn from?
- Who do you love collaborating with (or who do you think you'd love collaborating with)?
- Who are your biggest supporters?
- What groups are you a part of, or want to be a part of?
- Who currently follows your work?
- Who benefits the most from your work?
- Who do you really want to help?

My answers:

After answering these for myself, I felt self-conscious that I'd leave important people out, and also realized my specific people won't be very helpful to you (you probably don't know many of them). Onward!

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, or produced plays. 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 small part of me that feels embarrassed of 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 more than a decade of boarding up my old work every time I move on to something new, I now regret having not preserved 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.

Prompts for reflection:

- What projects are you proud of creating and why?
- What projects did you leave half-finished?
- What projects are you embarrassed of creating?
- How did those projects help you get to where you are today in your work?
- What projects are you excited about making in the future?

My answers:

What projects are you proud of creating?

S.Joy Studios, a web design studio 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. (This one I am both embarrassed of and proud of; I got to know a lot of really cool people that way, including Guy Kawasaki and Danielle LaPorte.)

The Gold Digging Excursion, an online program I created in 2009 helping people to find the “gold” in their websites. (Another one I’m both embarrassed of and proud of; it was my first online class and probably the one that helped the most people; the sales strategy was freaking amazing, and it was super fun and weird.)

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. (Both embarrassed and proud of this one; it was my first recurring product and brought in \$15,000/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 would come up with.)

The 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 trying to solve 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, a marketing company I founded in 2011. (Even though this was ultimately too ambitious, I’m really proud of our team and the vision we had; I believed in it so passionately and unreservedly.)

Water Your Enthusiasm, a website I created in 2012 that

asked the question “What do you want to be enthusiastic about?” and then gave you inspiring talks, music, books, etc. based on your answer. (Man I miss this site so much.)

Discover Your National Identity, an eBook 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 my team. I’m the most proud of the sales page I wrote for it, where we became the characters in the book, dressed up in costumes, and had a hilarious conversation about the fact we were selling a \$360 eBook—”Is it covered in gold?!”.)

The first and second edition of Gather the People. (It was my first book, and it helped me get the evolution of my approach on paper. It’s also apparently the first product I’ve made that wasn’t completely ridiculous.)

The Gather the People Weekly Assignments Program, an online program that gave students an assignment to complete every week, coinciding with the approach in this book.

What projects did you leave half-finished?

Web Designer Wakeup Call, a program I started creating to help web designers charge higher fees and have better systems. (This was in 2010/2011 when I had so many ideas and not enough time to do them all.)

The Year of the Nation, a free year-long email program I made in 2012 that gave people an inspiring essay and set of prompts every week to help them build a “nation” around their work. (I did this for probably 9 months before getting overwhelmed with the scope of it.)

The 90-Minute Work Day, a book I started writing based on the most visited/shared blog post I've ever written. (This was a really fantastic book and I know it would be so helpful for people, including myself. I still might finish this some day.)

Hello, Month, a website I created in 2013 where I wrote myself letters every single day to try to make each month better than the month before. (I was struggling with anxiety and depression and needed a way to process it that would be helpful for other people.)

What projects are you embarrassed of creating?

Basically all of them, especially the weird ones, but those are also the ones I loved the most. I look back on them and wish I was still that brave, with such an unwavering belief in my ideas. I'm really embarrassed for ending so many projects that were actually successful, but that filled me with shame because they never lived up to my ideals.

How did those projects help you get to where you are today in your work?

They were my hard-won education, not only in business and marketing, but in who I am as a person. My failures especially have led me to a place of deep self-knowledge and empathy toward others. The opportunities those projects have brought me and the people I've met along the way have led me to the role I'm in now, which is requiring me to grow and learn on an entirely new level.

What projects are you excited about making in the future?

Leadershipy, a website, podcast, and community we're building to explore a more empathetic, inclusive way of leading. (This is the first major project I've led with &yet. We shipped the first iteration in the spring of 2017, which was the community. It began with a 4-week onboarding adventure, complete with an original story, music, film, and artwork. We've learned a lot, and the next iteration will be released by the time this book is published.)

Another version of Gather the People, written for teams. (I still have plenty of research to do as we iterate our own approach, and I want to publish my discoveries.)

A Gather the People workshop. (This would be turning the deprecated Weekly Assignments Program into an online workshop that is self-paced, so that people can jump in based on where they're at with their work, rather than assuming everyone is starting at the very beginning with only the seed of an idea.)

Time

It's not the load that breaks you down, it's the way you carry it.

—Lena Horne

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. Since one of my deeply-held values is freedom, I've spent years moving in the direction of complete freedom in my schedule. I want to be free to work and play and live and move according to what I need and where my energy is in the moment. The time I have and how I prefer to spend it are currently very much in alignment.

But this didn't happen by accident, or in a short time period. In college, I worked as an office manager at my university. I had a very traditional 8-5 schedule, and I was never able to function well in that environment. For one thing, I'm an incredibly sensitive person who feels things very strongly. Something could completely derail me in the morning, but I would have to sit and suffer through small talk when I was full of anxiety or in a really broken place. In turn, I ended up taking way too many sick days, which made me feel like a lazy failure.

On the other hand, I would often get inspired to work on projects at completely random times, based on something that had moved me in some way. When this happens, I can spend hours focused on finishing something I'm really passionate about. The pattern made me realize that because of the kind of person I am, I need flexibility and freedom to be able to function well.

Some people need the opposite; too much freedom and flexibility would have them spinning their wheels or feeling listless and depressed. We are all so different. Knowing ourselves well is the first step to getting what we need and using our time in a way that takes advantage of our particular strengths and weaknesses.

If your time resources are currently not in alignment with what you need, you can get there. For me, that meant taking on some freelance work in the evenings. After a few months, I was able to

move to a 3/4 time position and took on more freelance work. After that worked for a while, I moved to a 1/2 time position. Then I finally quit my job for good, and I've never looked back.

Prompts for reflection:

- What does a typical workday look like for you?
- How would you spend your ideal workday? What needs to change for you to get there?

My answers:

What does a typical workday look like for you?

I wake up in the morning without an alarm, whenever I happen to wake up. Sometimes it's early. Sometimes it's later. Sometimes I have coffee and sit down with a book and my journal before the day starts. Sometimes I shower and dressed and get right to work.

Sometimes I work at home, when I'm feeling hermit-like. Sometimes I work from my favorite coffee shop when I want to see people I know. Sometimes I work from the library when I want to be out and alone at the same time. Very rarely I go to the office.

I spend my days doing a mix of learning, thinking, writing, planning, and talking to people. Sometimes I travel to conferences and other places to sponsor events, give talks, and do workshops

How would you spend your ideal workday? What needs to change for you to get there?

I've worked really hard to be able to live my ideal day already, but I have plenty of room for growth. For example, I want to have systems in place for our marketing and business development so that I can stop agonizing over it and think about the big picture again. I also want to make sure I'm taking care of my emotional health; this past year has been full of stressful life events (both good and bad), and I haven't been as productive because of it. I want to take care of those two things so I can focus on what I'm best at and feel more prolific and present throughout the day.

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. As much as I'm trying to learn to be motivated by something other than dire need, the truth is, every project I've made has originated from something akin to desperation.

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.

Prompts for reflection:

- What is your current income?
- What are your current expenses?
- What opportunities exist for you to increase your income and/or reduce your expenses? (You don't have to take any of these opportunities; just knowing they're there is helpful when you're thinking about possibilities for your work and life.)

My answers:

This exercise is useful if you need to figure out a way to make more money or if your income is directly tied to how much of your work you sell. Since mine isn't, my answers aren't relevant, so I'll skip this one.

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? Was ‘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’s exhilarating, and my brain goes into hyper-creative mode. I have all the energy there ever was to make it happen. (Until the high wears off, and then I don’t. But that’s for another chapter.)

But we’re 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 totally welcome, but optional.



