

Also by Twyla Tharp
Push Comes to Shove: An Autobiography

TWYLA THARP
THE CREATIVE HABIT
LEARN IT AND USE IT FOR LIFE

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

WITH MARK REITER

SIMON & SCHUSTER
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scratching

The first steps of a creative act are like groping in the dark: random and chaotic, feverish and fearful, a lot of busy-ness with no apparent or definable end in sight. There is nothing yet to research. For me, these moments are not pretty. I look like a desperate woman, tortured by the simple message thumping away in my head: “You need an idea.” It’s not enough for me to walk into a studio and start dancing, hoping that something good will come of my aimless cavorting on the studio floor. Creativity doesn’t generally work that way for me. (The rare times when it has stand out like April blizzards.) You can’t just dance or paint or write or sculpt. Those are just verbs. You need a tangible idea to get you going. The idea, however minuscule, is what turns the verb into a noun—paint into a painting, sculpt into sculpture, write into writing, dance into a dance.

Even though I look desperate, I don’t feel desperate, because I have a habitual routine to keep me going.

I call it scratching. You know how you scratch away at a lottery ticket to see if you’ve won? That’s what I’m doing when I begin a piece. I’m digging through everything to find something. It’s like clawing at the side of a mountain to get a toehold, a grip, some sort of traction to keep moving upward and onward.

Scratching takes many shapes. A fashion designer is scratching when he visits vintage clothing stores, studies music videos, and parks himself at a sidewalk cafe to see what the pedestrians are wearing.

A film director is scratching when she grabs a flight to Rome, trusting that she will get her next big idea in that inspiring city. The act of changing your environment is the scratch.

An architect is scratching when he walks through a rock quarry, studying the algebraic connections of fallen rocks or the surface of a rock wall, or the sweeping space of the quarry itself. We see rocks; the architect sees space and feels texture and assesses building materials. All this sensory input may yield an idea.

You can scratch through books. I once walked into the office of a four-star Manhattan chef and his assistant as they were scouring through an enormous pile of international cookbooks, none of them in English as far as I could tell, obviously looking for menu ideas. They had a dazed, sheepish look in their eyes—dazed because I had interrupted them as they were zoning out in their pursuit of a good idea, sheepish because no one likes to be caught in the act of scratching.

Scratching can look like borrowing or appropriating, but it’s an essential part of creativity. It’s primal, and very private. It’s a way of saying to the gods, “Oh, don’t mind me, I’ll just wander around in these back hallways . . .” and then grabbing that piece of fire and running like hell.

I’m often asked, “Where do you get your ideas?” This happens to anyone who is willing to stand in front of an audience and talk about his or her work. The short answer is: everywhere. It’s like asking “Where do you find the air you breathe?” Ideas are all around you.

I hesitate to wax eloquent about the omnipresence of ideas and how everything we need to make something out of nothing—tell a story, design a building,

hum a melody—already resides within us in our experience, memories, taste, judgment, critical demeanor, humanity, purpose, and humor. I hesitate because it is so blindingly obvious. If I'm going to be a cheerleader for the creative urge, let it be for something other than the oft-repeated notion that ideas are everywhere.

What people are really asking, I suspect, is not "Where do you get your ideas?" but "*How* do you get them?"

To answer that, you first have to appreciate what an idea is.

Ideas take on many forms. There are good ideas and bad ideas. Big ideas and little ideas.

A good idea is one that turns you on rather than shuts you off. It keeps generating more ideas and they improve on one another. A bad idea closes doors instead of opening them. It's confining and restrictive. The line between good and bad ideas is very thin. A bad idea in the hands of the right person can easily be tweaked into a good idea.

I like the following exchange between the movie producer Art Linson and the writer David Mamet, as Linson recorded it in his book of Hollywood tales, *What Just Happened?*:

The first rule of producing is to find a writer with an idea, or get an idea and find a writer. Since David Mamet and I had done The Untouchables together we'd developed a good professional working relationship: You get me a lot of money, I get you a good script.

I placed the call: "Hi, Dave."

"What's the shot?" he asked.

"I got a new deal. I'm looking for you to write a new script."

"Fine."

"There'll be lots of money."

"Good. Let's do it."

"It's not that easy."

"Why?"

"Because if you don't tell me what it's about I can't get you the money."

"Fine. What do you want it to be about?"

"I don't know, that's why I'm calling you."

"I understand."

"Dave, how about an adventure movie?"

"Fine."

"Something castable. Two guys, maybe."

"Fine."

"C'mon, Dave, I need more to go on."

"O.K. . . . How 'bout two guys and a bear?"

"It's a start."

In Hollywood, an adventure movie with two guys doesn't quite qualify as an idea. Two guys and a bear does. It adheres to the unshakable rule that you don't have a really good idea until you combine two little ideas. Like all good ideas, it kept moving forward, eventually evolving into the movie *The Edge* with Anthony Hopkins and Alec Baldwin.

The difference between good and bad ideas is a lot like E. M. Forster's distinction between narrative and plot. Plot is "The queen died; the king died." Narrative is "The queen died; the king died of a broken heart." One man's bear is another's brokenhearted king. That is all you need to know about good ideas and bad.

The more useful comparison involves big ideas and little ideas.

You (and by "you" I mean both you and me, dear reader) don't scratch for big ideas. They come upon you mysteriously, unbidden, sometimes unwelcome (especially when they become impossible to execute). There is always an ulterior motive behind a big idea, usually that you want to catch people's attention, or make a pile of money, or both. Big ideas are self-contained and self-defining projects. I get them once or twice a year whenever I start to fret about the impermanence of my craft and want to make something enduring. I want people to remember I was here.

For me, a big idea is thinking I can film, preserve, and archive all my dances and calling it the “Decades” project. A big idea is waking up one day and telling myself I want to make a Broadway musical to the songs of Billy Joel. They are big ideas because they take up a lot of space in my mind, and if I commit to them, they will be all-consuming. They are big ideas because, in and of themselves, they are meaningless, little more than a goal or a dream; they cease to exist if I fail to follow up on them with the steady string of small ideas that make each a reality. For the musical, if I can’t figure out a way to speak to Billy Joel and get his cooperation, if I can’t select the right songs, if I can’t construct a recognizable story line to tie the songs together, if I can’t create the dance steps and find the best dancers and persuade people with money to back the show, and so on and so on with thousands of other daily sparks and imaginings and choices . . . then the big idea quickly shrivels and evaporates into nothing.

That is why you scratch for little ideas. Without the little ideas, there are no big ideas.

Scratching is what you do when you can’t wait for the thunderbolt to hit you. As Freud said, “When inspiration does not come to me, I go halfway to meet it.” How is that different from a movie producer calling up a gifted writer and prodding him to suggest a plot line of “two men and a bear”? If you go halfway, you double your chances of getting a toehold on an idea.

Remember this when you’re struggling for a big idea. You’re much better off scratching for a small one.

In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig describes an experience he had teaching rhetoric to college students in Bozeman, Montana. One girl, a serious and disciplined student often described by her teachers as lacking creativity, wanted to write a five-hundred-word essay about the United States. Pirsig opined that this was rather broad, and suggested that she narrow it to the town of Bozeman. When the paper came due, she arrived empty-handed and very upset, explaining that she’d tried but that she couldn’t think of anything to say.

Pirsig next advised that she narrow it further to the main street of Bozeman. Again, she came in without an essay and in obvious distress. This time,

he told her angrily, “Narrow it down to the front of one building on the main street of Bozeman. The Opera House. Start with the upper left-hand brick.”

Her eyes, behind the thick-lensed glasses, opened wide. She came in the next class with a puzzled look and handed him a five-thousand-word essay on the front of the Opera House on the main street of Bozeman, Montana. “I sat in the hamburger stand across the street,” she said, “and started writing about the first brick, and the second brick, and then by the third brick it all started to come and I couldn’t stop.”

When you’re in scratching mode, the tiniest microcell of an idea will get you going. Musicians know this because compositions rarely come to them whole and complete. They call their morsels of inspiration lines or riffs or hooks or licks. That’s what they look for when they scratch for an idea.

It’s the same for me. A dance doesn’t hit me whole and complete. Inspiration comes in molecules of movement, sometimes in nanoseconds. A quick combination of three steps is an idea. A turn of the foot coupled with an arm gesture is an idea. A new way of collapsing to the floor is an idea. A man grabbing a woman above the elbow is an idea. A quick combination of five steps leading into a jump is practically a mega-idea—enough to keep me going for hours.

When I’m scratching I’m improvising. Like a jazz musician jamming for an hour to find a few interesting notes, a choreographer looks for interesting movement. I didn’t start out knowing this; it came to me over time, as I realized that I would never get to the essential core of movement and dance through a cerebral process. I could prepare, order, organize, structure, and edit my creativity in my head, but I couldn’t think my way into a dance. To generate ideas, I had to *move*. It’s the same if you’re a painter: You can’t imagine the work, you can only generate ideas when you put pencil to paper, brush to canvas—when you actually do something physical.

Here's how I learned to improvise: I played some music in the studio and I started to move. It sounds obvious, but I wonder how many people, whatever their medium, appreciate the gift of improvisation. It's your one opportunity in life to be completely free, with no responsibilities and no consequences. You don't have to be good or great or even interesting. It's you alone, with no one watching or judging. If anything comes of it, you decide whether the world gets to see it. In essence, you are giving yourself permission to daydream during working hours.

I suppose this is no different from a songwriter noodling around at the keyboard waiting for a corpuscle of music to emerge and engage the ear, or a painter dashing off sketches right and left until one pleases the eye. That's what improvising is like for me. There's no tollbooth between my impulse and my action. I just do it and I consider the results, the consequences, and the truth (if any) later in repose. That's an incredible place to be. If you're privileged enough to be able to do that for forty-five minutes a few days a week, you have been given something wonderful.

There was one big problem with my improvisation: I couldn't see the results. A painter has those sketches littering the floor to look at later. A writer can read what's been written. A composer can jot down the notes that enticed his ear. I didn't have a way to capture my improvising when I started out (this was the 1960s, before the invention of portable video). It bothered me that I was wasting a lot of good movement in the studio. So I trained myself, through muscle memory, to remember my improvised steps. I called it going into "capture mode." Then I realized that I was defeating the purpose of improvisation, because once I asked my mind to *retain*, it was no longer free to improvise *without inhibition*. They were opposed activities, freezing me in place. The act of retaining defeated the purpose of scratching, which was to stop my conscious mind and mental filters from blocking my creative impulses.

I want to be clear here. When I talk about turning off the conscious mind and mental filters, I am not talking about meditating or mining the subconscious. Scratching is real and tangible. It bloodies your fingernails. The key is not to block

yourself; you have to leave yourself open to everything. When he needed an idea, Thomas Edison liked to sit in a "thinking chair" holding a metal ball bearing in each palm, with his hands closed. On the floor, directly under his hands, were two metal pie pans. Edison would close his eyes and allow his body to relax. Somewhere between consciousness and dreaming his hands would relax and open without effort, letting the ball bearing fall noisily into the pie pans. That's when he would wake up and write down whatever idea was in his head at that moment. It was his way of coming up with ideas without his conscious mind censoring them.

The Harvard psychologist Stephen Kosslyn says that ideas can be acted upon in four ways. First, you must *generate* the idea, usually from memory or experience or activity. Then you have to *retain* it—that is, hold it steady in your mind and keep it from disappearing. Then you have to *inspect* it—study it and make inferences about it. Finally, you have to be able to *transform* it—alter it in some way to suit your higher purposes.

Some people are good at some of these but not all four. They can generate an idea, but they can't hold on to it or transform it. My problem was that I was generating a lot of ideas, but generating was at odds with my need to retain, inspect, and transform. That's when I discovered the video camera, which is the technical heart of much of my scratching. When I improvise in a studio, alone or with other dancers, I always have a video camera getting everything on tape, so I can review it later. For me, scratching for ideas became a technical scheme of improvising (generating ideas), getting them on tape (retaining), watching the tapes later on (inspecting), and finding a way to use them in a dance (transforming).

There are as many ways to scratch for ideas as there are ideas:

The most common is **reading**. If you're like me, reading is your first line of defense against an empty head. It's how you learned as a child. It's how you absorb difficult information. It's how you keep your mind disciplined. If you monitor your reading assiduously, it's even how you grade your brain's conditioning; like an athlete in training, the more you read, the more mentally fit you feel. It

doesn't matter if it's a book, magazine, newspaper, billboard, instruction manual, or cereal box—reading generates ideas, because you're literally filling your head with ideas and letting your imagination filter them for something useful. If I stopped reading, I'd stop thinking. It's that simple.

For a certain type of artist, particularly storytellers and songwriters, **everyday conversation** is scratching. If you listen, you will hear ideas. I always liked Paul McCartney's explanation of how he and John Lennon wrote "Eight Days a Week." McCartney was in a chauffeur-driven car on his way to Lennon's suburban home to work with him. He asked the driver, "How've you been?" "Working hard," said the driver, "working eight days a week." McCartney had never heard the phrase before and mentioned it to Lennon as they sat down to work. "Right," said Lennon, and instantly launched into "Ooh, I need your lovin' . . ." They wrote the song on the spot.

You can scratch for ideas by enjoying other **people's handiwork**, whether it's in a museum or a theater or an exhibition. When his operettas began to lose the public's favor, W. S. Gilbert, the wordsmithing half of Gilbert and Sullivan, grew desperate for a bold reinvention of the form—or at least a good idea. He got it by attending a London exhibition of Japanese culture. This gave Gilbert the idea for *The Mikado*, inspired his partner Arthur Sullivan to compose his greatest score, and linked into a wave of Japanophilia rolling through Europe. All because of a visit to an exhibition.

You can also scratch in the footsteps of your **mentors and heroes**, using their paradigms as a starting point for ideas. But you have to be careful. When I was beginning, I would sometimes find myself solving problems in exactly the same way that teachers such as Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham solved them. I would catch myself and say, "Wait a minute. That's how Martha or Merce would do it. We can't have that." Scratching among the

paradigms is a dangerous habit if it turns you into an imitator rather than a creator.

You can scratch amid **nature**. Mozart and Beethoven, for example, were ardent bird lovers. They would get musical motifs from listening to birds. Bird songs don't do the same for me. I would have to see a bird move—how it waddles, how it stays close to its center, how it flies—to spark an idea. But an actor might get an idea about character by studying the carriage of a bird. A painter would study the bird's coloring.

Reading, conversation, environment, culture, heroes, mentors, nature—all are lottery tickets for creativity. Scratch away at them and you'll find out how big a prize you've won.

The tricky part about scratching, however, is that you can't stop with one idea. Henry James said that genius is the act of perceiving similarity among disparate things. In the empty room you're trying to connect the dots, linking A to B to C to maybe come up with H. Scratching is a means to identifying A, and if you can get to A, you've got a grip on the slippery rock wall. You've got purchase. You can move on to B, which is mandatory. You cannot stop with one idea. You don't really have a workable idea until you combine two ideas.

It's a simple dynamic. If you want to see it dramatized, watch Mike Nichols's 1988 film *Working Girl*. It is ostensibly a Manhattan fairy tale about a lower-middle-class woman (played by Melanie Griffith) trying to climb out of the secretarial pool at an investment bank and win her prince charming (Harrison Ford). But it's infinitely more interesting if you see it as a movie about creativity. This "working girl" knows how to scratch. She gets ideas everywhere. She reads a gossip item about a radio disc jockey. She also sees a business magazine piece about a conglomerate on the prowl for acquisitions, and an item about its founder's daughter getting married. She puts the ideas together and tries to broker a deal for the conglomerate to acquire a radio network. At the end, she's

challenged to describe how she came up with the plan for the acquisition. It's a telling scene. She has just been fired. On her way out of the building, with all her files and personal items packed in a box (a box just like mine!), she gets a chance to explain her thought process to the mogul:

See? This is Forbes. It's just your basic article about how you were looking to expand into broadcasting. Right? Okay now. The same day—I'll never forget this—I'm reading Page Six of the New York Post and there's this item on Bobby Stein, the radio talk show guy who does all those gross jokes about Ethiopia and the Betty Ford Center. Well, anyway, he's hosting this charity auction that night. Real bluebloods and won't that be funny? Now I turn the page to Suzy who does the society stuff and there's this picture of your daughter—see, nice picture—and she's helping to organize the charity ball. So I started to think: Trask, Radio, Trask, Radio. . . . So now here we are.

He's impressed and hires her on the spot. Forget the fairy-tale plot; as a demonstration of how to link A to B and come up with C, *Working Girl* is a primer in the art of scratching.

Actually, in business it's perfectly legitimate to use the ideas you've scratched for without worrying about transforming them into something new. A talent agent I know was meeting with an opera singer to discuss ways to enlarge her career and broaden her appeal to the popular market. The diva mentioned that she would like to see some of the famous arias she'd recorded appear in films and on movie soundtracks, so millions of people would be exposed to her voice. A worthy objective. The executive had an idea for her: He showed her how the songwriter Burt Bacharach had produced a 4-CD limited edition of all the different singers who have recorded his hits over the years. He stamped out one thousand copies of this private anthology and sent them to music executives and producers around the world. Bacharach's objective was to get producers thinking of him when they were looking for tunes for their recording artists and

soundtracks. The agent suggested the same for the diva: print up a private anthology of her best arias for the wider music community beyond the opera world. The agent was quite pleased with himself when he told me this useful idea. To my eye, he had taken A (Bacharach's idea) and B (the diva's desire to broaden her market) and come up with A (do the same as Bacharach). It was smart and practical, and it was probably the right answer. He'd done his homework. He hadn't done anything particularly creative, but then that wasn't his goal.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not knocking this sort of connective thinking in business. It's smart and practical. Use what worked before and adapt it to your situation. With profits, paychecks, and promotions at stake, it's only natural to try to reduce the risk by relying on what's already worked. We've all been in meetings to deal with a problem. Everyone is stumped until someone remembers how another group solved the same problem. Everyone nods with relief. "Great idea," says the boss. "Let's do that." And moves on. That's legitimate connective thinking in business.

But an artist cannot do that. People don't want to see you copying someone else (in fact, if you do, they take special delight in figuring out who or what you have copied). Art is not about minimizing risk and delivering work that is guaranteed to please. Artists have bigger goals. If being an artist means pushing the envelope, you don't want to stuff your material in someone else's envelope. You don't want to know the envelope has been invented. You want to find that out on your own.

Scratching is a wildly unruly process. But a few rules can make it a bit more manageable.

Be in Shape.

Scratching takes longer when you're rusty. Just as an athlete performs better if he's in top shape, ideas will come to you more quickly if you've been putting in the time at your chosen craft. If it's my first day back after a long layoff, I'm prepared to write off a whole week of work; I know much of it will be worthless, but I

have to go through that process to get my mind and body back into shape. When my conditioning is right, I can feel productive in two or three minutes. You may already know this. Whatever your medium, if you've been away from it for a few weeks, the first days are going to be clumsy and fruitless. But things get easier as the rust falls away. The ideas come more smoothly. The hands on the instrument, the fingers at the keyboard, the eye at the easel respond in sync to the urgings of your mind and heart. You are fit and gleaming. You can't wait to attack your work.

Scratch in the Best Places.

When I'm searching for music for a dance, I go immediately to the best composers: Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Haydn. I listen to all their music because I want to educate my ear and, more important, I want to find their best music. You only go around once in this life, so I'm not interested in creating dances to their minor works.

I'm ruthless about this. I look at scratching in the best places as if I were working at a tailor's table. You've got the bolt of fabric, the tracing paper patterns, the pins to attach the pattern to the fabric, the scissors to cut the fabric, and the thread to stitch it all together. But the key is the fabric. The better the fabric, the more likely you will do your best work. That's why finding a great piece of music is key to making a great dance. The better the music, the better the dance. My objective is not to screw it up.

Sculptors know that half their job is selecting the best stone to work with. It's all in the material. If they get the best material, they are over the hump. Directors say the same thing about casting: If you've got the best people, it's hard to go wrong. That's the way I feel about scratching among the masters. It makes it so much easier to get home.

You should do the same. If you read for inspiration, read the top-drawer writers, and read their masterworks first. If you get your inspiration from art, look at the masters. If it's movies, focus on directors in the pantheon of greats. Scratch among the best and you will automatically raise the quality of ideas you uncover.

Never Scratch the Same Place Twice.

An integral part of Ulysses S. Grant's battle strategy was to never go back over the same terrain—you might meet the enemy pursuing you. More important, you gain no new information if you retrace your steps over already familiar land. Grant was always scouting new routes over new ground. That works for me, too, with scratching. I improvise in new rooms, turn on different music, change my reading habits, all in an effort to fight off old habits and shake myself up. If you scratch the same way all the time, you'll end up in the same place with the same old ideas.

Maintain the White Hot Pitch.

You've been there when a boss throws a temper tantrum in a meeting. Everyone in the room goes "Uh oh! The boss is mad. We better shape up." The tantrum, judiciously applied, is a great wake-up call to get people to do something. It's the same for you when you're alone and scratching for an idea. Throw a tantrum at yourself. Anger is a cheap adrenaline rush, but when you're going nowhere and can't get started, it will do.

Scratching is not about control and repose. It's about unleashing furious mindless energy and watching it bounce off everything in your path. The hope is that a spark will fly from all that contact and combustion—and it usually does.

I liken this mindless high-energy state to lifting deadweight off the ground. There is a moment when you've bent your knees, grabbed the bar, and are about to neutralize the massive gravity of this object. At that moment your mind is blank. You are all impulse and intention. You cannot think about the weight. You just have to lift it.

It's the same with scratching. When you're scratching for an idea, you don't need to think ahead. You have to trust the unconscious rush and let it hurtle forward unedited and unencumbered. Let it be awful and awkward and wrong. You can fix the results later, but you won't generate the ideas at all if you cool down the white hot pitch.

Scratching is where creativity begins. It is the moment where your ideas first take flight and begin to defy gravity. If you try to rein it in, you'll never know how high you can go.