

TWYLA THARP

THE CREATIVE HABIT

LEARN IT AND USE IT FOR LIFE

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

WITH MARK REITER

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## **Also by Twyla Tharp**

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*Push Comes to Shove: An Autobiography*







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To my mother, Lecille Confer Tharp,  
for making sure I had all the tools I would need.

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To my father, William Albert Tharp,  
for giving me the DNA to build things from scratch.

To my son, Jesse Alexander Huot,  
for helping me create each new day.



And those who had seen it told how he who had been possessed with demons  
was healed.

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—Luke 8:36



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# The Creative Habit

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## I walk into a white room

**I walk into** a large white room. It's a dance studio in midtown Manhattan. I'm wearing a sweatshirt, faded jeans, and Nike cross-trainers. The room is lined with eight-foot-high mirrors. There's a boom box in the corner. The floor is clean, virtually spotless if you don't count the thousands of skid marks and footprints left there by dancers rehearsing. Other than the mirrors, the boom box, the skid marks, and me, the room is empty.

In five weeks I'm flying to Los Angeles with a troupe of six dancers to perform a dance program for eight consecutive evenings in front of twelve hundred people every night. It's my troupe. I'm the choreographer. I have half of the program in hand—a fifty-minute ballet for all six dancers set to Beethoven's twenty-ninth piano sonata, the "Hammerklavier." I created the piece more than a year ago on many of these same dancers, and I've spent the past few weeks rehearsing it with the company.

The other half of the program is a mystery. I don't know what music I'll be using. I don't know which dancers I'll be working with. I have no idea what the costumes will look like, or the lighting, or who will be performing the music. I have no idea of the length of the piece, although it has to be long enough to fill the second half of a full program to give the paying audience its money's worth.

The length of the piece will dictate how much rehearsal time I need. This, in turn, means getting on the phone to dancers, scheduling studio time, and getting the ball rolling—all on the premise that something wonderful will come out of what I fashion in the next few weeks in this empty white room.

My dancers expect me to deliver because my choreography represents their livelihood. The presenters in Los Angeles expect the same because they've sold a lot of tickets to people with the promise that they'll see something new and interesting from me. The theater owner (without really thinking about it) expects it as well; if I don't show up, his theater will be empty for a week. That's a lot of people, many of whom I've never met, counting on me to be creative.

But right now I'm not thinking about any of this. I'm in a room with the obligation to create a major dance piece. The dancers will be here in a few minutes. What are we going to do?

To some people, this empty room symbolizes something profound, mysterious, and terrifying: the task of starting with nothing and working your way toward creating something whole and beautiful and satisfying. It's no different for a writer rolling a fresh sheet of paper into his typewriter (or more likely firing up the blank screen on his computer), or a painter confronting a virginal canvas, a sculptor staring at a raw chunk of stone, a composer at the piano with his fingers hovering just above the keys. Some people find this moment—the moment before creativity begins—so painful that they simply cannot deal with it. They get up and walk away from the computer, the canvas, the keyboard;

they take a nap or go shopping or fix lunch or do chores around the house. They procrastinate. In its most extreme form, this terror totally paralyzes people.

The blank space can be humbling. But I've faced it my whole professional life. It's my job. It's also my calling. Bottom line: Filling this empty space constitutes my identity.

I'm a dancer and choreographer. Over the last 35 years, I've created 130 dances and ballets. Some of them are good, some less good (that's an understatement—some were public humiliations). I've worked with dancers in almost every space and environment you can imagine. I've rehearsed in cow pastures. I've rehearsed in hundreds of studios, some luxurious in their austerity and expansiveness, others filthy and gritty, with rodents literally racing around the edges of the room. I've spent eight months on a film set in Prague, choreographing the dances and directing the opera sequences for Milos Forman's *Amadeus*. I've staged sequences for horses in New York City's Central Park for the film *Hair*. I've worked with dancers in the opera houses of London, Paris, Stockholm, Sydney, and Berlin. I've run my own company for three decades. I've created and directed a hit show on Broadway. I've worked long enough and produced with sufficient consistency that by now I find not only challenge and trepidation but peace as well as promise in the empty white room. It has become my home.

After so many years, I've learned that being creative is a full-time job with its own daily patterns. That's why writers, for example, like to establish routines for themselves. The most productive ones get started early in the morning, when the world is quiet, the phones aren't ringing, and their minds are rested, alert, and not yet polluted by other people's words. They might set a goal for themselves—write fifteen hundred words, or stay at their desk until noon—but the real secret is that they do this every day. In other words, they are disciplined. Over time, as the daily routines become second nature, discipline morphs into habit.

It's the same for any creative individual, whether it's a painter finding his way each morning to the easel, or a medical researcher returning daily to the laboratory. The routine is as much a part of the creative process as the lightning bolt of inspiration, maybe more. And this routine is available to everyone.

Creativity is not just for artists. It's for **businesspeople** looking for a new way to close a sale; it's for **engineers** trying to solve a problem; it's for **parents** who want their **children** to see the world in more than one way. Over the past four decades, I have been engaged in one creative pursuit or another every day, in both my professional and my personal life. I've thought a great deal about what it means to be creative, and how to go about it efficiently. I've also learned from the painful experience of going about it in the worst possible way. I'll tell you about both. And I'll give you exercises that will challenge some of your creative assumptions—to make you stretch, get stronger, last longer. After all, you stretch before you jog, you loosen up before you work out, you practice before you play. It's no different for your mind.

I will keep stressing the point about creativity being augmented by routine and habit. Get used to it. In these pages a philosophical tug of war will periodically rear its head. It is the perennial debate, born in the Romantic era, between the beliefs that all creative acts are born of (a) some transcendent, inexplicable Dionysian act of inspiration, a kiss from God on your brow that allows you to give the world *The Magic Flute*, or (b) hard work.

If it isn't obvious already, I come down on the side of hard work. That's why this book is called *The Creative Habit*. Creativity is a habit, and the best creativity is a result of good work habits. That's it in a nutshell.

The film *Amadeus* (and the play by Peter Shaffer on which it's based) dramatizes and romanticizes the divine origins of creative genius. Antonio Salieri, representing the talented hack, is cursed to live in the time of Mozart, the gifted and undisciplined genius who writes as though touche

by the hand of God. Salieri recognizes the depth of Mozart's genius, and is tortured that God has chosen someone so unworthy to be His divine creative vessel.

Of course, this is hogwash. **There are no "natural" geniuses.** Mozart was his father's son. Leopold Mozart had gone through an arduous education, not just in music, but also in philosophy and religion; he was a sophisticated, broad-thinking man, famous throughout Europe as a composer and pedagogue. This is not news to music lovers. Leopold had a massive influence on his young son. I question how much of a "natural" this young boy was. Genetically, of course, he was probably more inclined to write music than, say, play basketball, since he was only three feet tall when he captured the public's attention. But his first good fortune was to have a father who was a composer and a virtuoso on the violin, who could approach keyboard instruments with skill, and who upon recognizing some ability in his son, said to himself, "This is interesting. He likes music. Let's see how far we can take this."

Leopold taught the young Wolfgang everything about music, including counterpoint and harmony. He saw to it that the boy was exposed to everyone in Europe who was writing good music or could be of use in Wolfgang's musical development. Destiny, quite often, is a determined parent. Mozart was hardly some naive prodigy who sat down at the keyboard and, with God whispering in his ears, let the music flow from his fingertips. It's a nice image for selling tickets to movies, but whether or not God has kissed your brow, you still have to work. Without learning and preparation, you won't know how to harness the power of that kiss.

Nobody worked harder than Mozart. By the time he was twenty-eight years old, his hands were deformed because of all the hours he had spent practicing, performing, and gripping a quill pen to compose. That's the missing element in the popular portrait of Mozart. Certainly, he had a gift that set him apart from others. He was the most complete musician imaginable, one who wrote for all instruments in all combinations, and no one has written greater music for the human voice. Still, few people, even those hugely gifted, are capable of the application and focus that Mozart displayed throughout his short life. As Mozart himself wrote to a friend, "People err who think my art comes easily to me. I assure you, dear friend, nobody has devoted so much time and thought to composition as I. There is not a famous master whose music I have not industriously studied through many times. Mozart's focus was fierce; it had to be for him to deliver the music he did in his relatively short life, under the conditions he endured, writing in coaches and delivering scores just before the curtain went up, dealing with the distractions of raising a family and the constant need for money. Whatever scope and grandeur you attach to Mozart's musical gift, his so-called genius, his discipline and work ethic were its equal.

I'm sure this is what Leopold Mozart saw so early in his son who, as a three-year-old, one day impulsively jumped up on the stool to play his older sister's harpsichord—and was immediately smitten. Music quickly became Mozart's passion, his preferred activity. I seriously doubt that Leopold had to tell his son for very long, "Get in there and practice your music." The child did it on his own.

More than anything, this book is about preparation: **In order to be creative you have to know how to prepare to be creative.**

No one can give you your subject matter, your creative content; if they could, it would be their creation and not yours. But there's a process that generates creativity—and you can learn it. And you can make it habitual.

There's a paradox in the notion that creativity should be a habit. We think of creativity as a way of keeping everything fresh and new, while habit implies routine and repetition. That paradox intrigues me because it occupies the place where creativity and skill rub up against each other.

It takes skill to bring something you've imagined into the world: to use words to create believable lives, to select the colors and textures of paint to represent a haystack at sunset, to combin

ingredients to make a flavorful dish. No one is born with that skill. It is developed through exercise, through repetition, through a blend of learning and reflection that's both painstaking and rewarding. And it takes time. Even Mozart, with all his innate gifts, his passion for music, and his father's devoted tutelage, needed to get twenty-four youthful symphonies under his belt before he composed something enduring with number twenty-five. If art is the bridge between what you see in your mind and what the world sees, then skill is how you build that bridge.

That's the reason for the exercises. They will help you develop skill. Some might seem simple. Do them anyway—you can never spend enough time on the basics. Before he could write *Così fan tutte*, Mozart had practiced his scales.

While modern dance and ballet are my *métier*, they are not the subject of this book. I promise you that the text will not be littered with dance jargon. You will not be confused by first positions and *pliés* and *tendus* in these pages. I will assume that you're a reasonably sophisticated and open-minded person. I hope you've been to the ballet and seen a dance company in action on stage. If you haven't, shame on you; that's like admitting you've never read a novel or strolled through a museum or heard Beethoven symphony live. If you give me that much, we can work together.

The way I figure it, my work habits are applicable to everyone. You'll find that I'm a stickler about preparation. My daily routines are transactional. Everything that happens in my day is a transaction between the external world and my internal world. Everything is raw material. Everything is relevant. **Everything is usable.** Everything feeds into my creativity. But without proper preparation I cannot see it, retain it, and use it. Without the time and effort invested in getting ready to create, you can be hit by the thunderbolt and it'll just leave you stunned.

Take, for example, a wonderful scene in the film *The Karate Kid*. The teenaged Daniel asks the wise and wily Mr. Miyagi to teach him karate. The old man agrees and orders Daniel first to wax his car in precisely opposed circular motions (“Wax on, wax off”). Then he tells Daniel to paint his wooden fence in precise up and down motions. Finally, he makes Daniel hammer nails to repair a wall. Daniel is puzzled at first, then angry. He wants to learn the martial arts so he can defend himself. Instead he is confined to household chores. When Daniel is finished restoring Miyagi's car, fence, and walls, he explodes with rage at his “mentor.” Miyagi physically attacks Daniel, who without thought or hesitation defends himself with the core thrusts and parries of karate. Through Miyagi's deceptively simple chores, Daniel has absorbed the basics of karate—without knowing it.

In the same spirit as Miyagi teaches karate, I hope this book will help you be more creative. I can't guarantee that everything you'll create will be wonderful—that's up to you—but I do promise that if you read through the book and heed even half the suggestions, you'll never be afraid of a blank page or an empty canvas or a white room again. Creativity will become your habit.



### rituals of preparation

**I begin each day** of my life with a ritual: I wake up at 5:30 A.M., put on my workout clothes, my leg warmers, my sweatshirts, and my hat. I walk outside my Manhattan home, hail a taxi, and tell the driver to take me to the Pumping Iron gym at 91st Street and First Avenue, where I work out for two hours. The ritual is not the stretching and weight training I put my body through each morning at the gym; the ritual is the cab. The moment I tell the driver where to go I have completed the ritual.

It's a simple act, but doing it the same way each morning habitualizes it—makes it repeatable, easy to do. It reduces the chance that I would skip it or do it differently. It is one more item in my arsenal of routines, and one less thing to think about.

Some people might say that simply stumbling out of bed and getting into a taxicab hardly rates the honorific “ritual.” It glorifies a mundane act that anyone can perform.

I disagree. First steps are hard; it's no one's idea of fun to wake up in the dark every day and haul one's tired body to the gym. Like everyone, I have days when I wake up, stare at the ceiling, and ask myself, Gee, do I feel like working out today? But the quasi-religious power I attach to this ritual keeps me from rolling over and going back to sleep.

It's vital to establish some rituals—automatic but decisive patterns of behavior—at the beginning of the creative process, when you are most at peril of turning back, chickening out, giving up, or going the wrong way.

A ritual, the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells me, is “a prescribed order of performing religious or other devotional service.” All that applies to my morning ritual. Thinking of it as a ritual has a transforming effect on the activity.

Turning something into a ritual eliminates the question, Why am I doing this? By the time I give the taxi driver directions, it's too late to wonder why I'm going to the gym and not snoozing under the warm covers of my bed. The cab is moving. I'm committed. Like it or not, I'm going to the gym.

The ritual erases the question of whether or not I like it. It's also a friendly reminder that I'm doing the right thing. (I've done it before. It was good. I'll do it again.)

We all have rituals in our day, whether we're aware of them or not.

A friend, a hard-boiled pragmatist with not a spiritual bone in his body, practices yoga in the morning in his home to overcome back pain. He starts each session by lighting a candle. He doesn't need the candle to do his poses (although the mild glow and the faint scent have a tonic effect, he says), but the ceremonial act of lighting this votive candle transforms yoga into a sanctifying ritual. It means he's taking the session seriously, and that for the next ninety minutes he is committed to

practicing yoga. **Candle. Click. Yoga.** An automatic three-step call-and-response mechanism that anchors his morning. ~~When he's done, he blows out the candle and goes on with the rest of his day.~~

An executive I know begins each day with a twenty-minute meeting with her assistant. It's a simple organizational tool, but turning it into a daily ceremony for two people intensifies the bond between them and gives their day a predictable, repeatable kick-start. They don't have to think about what to do when they arrive at the office. They already know it's their twenty-minute ritual.

Dancers are totally governed by ritual. It begins with class from 10:00 A.M. to noon every day, where they stretch and warm up their muscles and put their bodies through the classic dance positions. They do this daily, without fail, because all dancers working in class know that their efforts at strengthening the muscles will armor them against injury in rehearsal or performance. What makes it a ritual is that they do it without questioning the need.

As with all sacred rites, the beginning of class is beautiful to watch. The dancers may straggle in and mill about, but they eventually assume, with frighteningly formal rigor, their customary place at the barre or on the floor. If a principal dancer walks in, they automatically shift places to give the star the center spot facing the mirror. Of such beliefs and traditions are rituals made. It's like going to church. We rarely question why we go to church, and we don't expect concrete answers when we do. We just know it feeds our spirit somehow, and so we do it.

A lot of habitually creative people have preparation rituals linked to the setting in which they choose to start their day. By putting themselves into that environment, they begin their creative day.

**The composer Igor Stravinsky** did the same thing every morning when he entered his studio to work: He sat at the piano and played a Bach fugue. Perhaps he needed the ritual to feel like a musician, or the playing somehow connected him to musical notes, his vocabulary. Perhaps he was honoring his hero, Bach, and seeking his blessing for the day. Perhaps it was nothing more than a simple method to get his fingers moving, his motor running, his mind thinking music. But repeating the routine each day in the studio induced some lick that got him started.

**I know a chef** who begins each day in the meticulously tended urban garden that dominates the tiny terrace of his Brooklyn home. He is obsessed with fresh ingredients, particularly herbs, spices, and flowers. Spending the first minutes of the day among his plants is his ideal creative environment for thinking about new flavor combinations and dishes. He putters about, feeling connected to nature and this gets him going. Once he picks a vegetable or herb, he can't let it sit there. He has to head off to the restaurant and start cooking.

**A painter I know** can't do anything in her studio without propulsive music pounding out of the speakers. Turning it on turns on a switch inside her. The beat gets her into a groove. It's the metronome for her creative life.

**A writer friend** can only write outside. He can't stand the thought of being chained indoors to his word processor while a "great day" is unfolding outside. He fears he's missing something stirring in the air. So he lives in Southern California and carries his coffee mug out to work in the warmth of

an open porch in his backyard. Mystically, he now believes he is missing nothing.

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In the end, there is no one ideal condition for creativity. What works for one person is useless for another. The only criterion is this: Make it easy on yourself. Find a working environment where the prospect of wrestling with your muse doesn't scare you, doesn't shut you down. It should make you want to be there, and once you find it, stick with it. To get the creative habit, you need a working environment that's habit-forming.

All preferred working states, no matter how eccentric, have one thing in common: When you enter into them, they impel you to get started. Whether it's the act of carrying a hot coffee mug to an outdoor porch, or the rock 'n' roll that gets a painter revved up to splash color on a canvas, or the stillness of an herb garden that puts a chef in a culinary trance, moving inside each of these routines gives you no choice but to *do something*. It's Pavlovian: follow the routine, get a creative payoff.

Athletes know the power of a triggering ritual. A pro golfer may walk along the fairway chatting with his caddie, his playing partner, a friendly official or scorekeeper, but when he stands behind the ball and takes a deep breath, he has signaled to himself that it's time to concentrate. A basketball player comes to the free-throw line, touches his socks, his shorts, receives the ball, bounces it exactly three times, and then he is ready to rise and shoot, exactly as he's done a hundred times a day in practice. By making the start of the sequence automatic, they replace doubt and fear with comfort and routine.

It worked for Beethoven, too, as these sketches, rendered between 1820 and 1825 by J. D. Böhm show. Although he was not physically fit, Beethoven would start each day with the same ritual: a morning walk during which he would scribble into a pocket sketchbook the first rough notes of whatever musical idea inevitably entered his head. Having done that, having limbered up his mind and transported himself into his version of a trance zone during the walk, he would return to his room and get to work.

As for me, my preferred working state is thermal—I need heat—and my preferred ritual is getting warm. That's why I start my day at the gym. I am in perpetual pursuit of body warmth. It can never be too hot for me. Even in the middle of sweltering August, when the rest of New York is half frozen in the comforts of air-conditioning, I have all the windows and doors of my apartment wide open as if to say, "Hello, heat!" I loathe air-conditioning. I like skin that is just about to break out in glistening sweat.

There's also a psychological component to heat: It calls up the warmth of the hearth and home. In a word, it says "mother," which is all about feeling safe and secure. A warm, secure dancer can work without fear. In that state of physical and psychic warmth, dancers touch their moments of greatest physical potential. They're not afraid to try new movements. They can trust their bodies, and that's when magic happens. When they're not warm, dancers are afraid—afraid of injury, afraid of looking bad to others, afraid they're falling short of the inner bar they set for themselves. That's a rotten state to be in.

There's a practical reason for this, of course. Unlike other art forms, dance is all about physical movement and exertion. Even in my sixties, I need to keep my muscles in a state of readiness to pursue my craft, so that when I demonstrate a step in rehearsal I can actually execute it with some amplitude and grace and not hurt myself. Every athlete knows this: warm up before playing or you'll pull a muscle. If I am warm, I feel I can do anything.

My morning workout ritual is the most basic form of self-reliance; it reminds me that, when all else fails, I can at least depend on myself. It's my algebra of self-reliance: I depend on my body in



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