

Die Empty

Todd Henry—2013.

Chapter 1: die empty.

- In my first book, the accidental creative, I recounted a meeting in which a friend asked a stranger an unexpected question: “what do you think is the most viable land in the world?” Several people throughout the world, such as Manhattan, the oil fields of the Middle East, and the gold mines of South Africa, before our friend indicated that they were way off track. He paused for a moment, and said, “You are all wrong. The most viable land in the world is the graveyard. In the graveyard are buried all the unwritten novels, never launched businesses, unreconciled relationships, and all of the other things that people thought, ‘I’ll get around to that tomorrow. One day, however, that tomorrow’s ran out.”
- Karoshi is a Japanese term that means “death from overwork.”
- Cultivating a love of the process is the key to making a lasting contribution.
- Also, organizations often make it easy to settle in, providing you with a good salary, a nice title, or sense of stability— the proverbial “golden handcuffs.” It’s easy to fall in love with these comfortable perks, but the love of comfort is often the enemy of greatness. There’s nothing wrong with experience and comfort as a byproduct of your labor, but you can’t make it your chief goal. Greatness emerges when you consistently choose to do what’s right, even when it’s uncomfortable.
- Too many people want to come out of the gate with a clear understanding of their life’s mission. There is no one thing that you are wired to do, and there are many ways you can add value to the world, while operating in your sweet spot. However, these opportunities will only become clearer over time as you act. They will develop slowly like a film in the darkroom, giving you clues as you experiment, fail and succeed.

Chapter 2: your contribution.

- The average man does not know what to do with his life, yet wants another one which will last forever. –Anatole France.
- Principle: your body of work should reflect what’s important to you.
- How much of your day do you spend doing work that you’ll be proud of later?
- The notion of blazing a path into the unknown is exciting, but it can also lead to a kind of “purpose paralysis” (fear of getting it wrong) or worse, frustration when the daily grind of work doesn’t seem to reward your pursuit of those flashes of inspiration.
- The 2012 study sponsored by Adobe and conducted by the research firm of strategy one interviewed 5000 adults, 1000 of each from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Japan, about their perceptions of creativity and their creative engagement. The study revealed while there is an increased expectation across all sectors for both creativity and productivity, in many workplaces creativity is frequently subverted due to the increasing pressure to get work done. Globally, only one in four people reported that they feel they are living up to their creative potential. What this sampling reveals is that when we have to choose between doing work we are proud of and just getting the job done, many of us feel compelled to do the latter. We

know there's always more work just around the horizon, ready to wash over us like a tsunami. We have to settle for what's practical over pursuing what's possible so we can live to fight another day. Thus, we save ourselves for tomorrow. But over time, approaching work this way corrodes our sense of purpose and our will to excel. We end up with far too many unexecuted ideas kicking around the back of our minds, and we eventually feel overwhelmed and stuck. We know that we are capable of more. The truth is there is no deep, dark secret to unleashing your best work and finding your sweet spot. Though not easy, it begins with the decision to build practices that help you scan your life for areas where you might be growing stagnant, and to help you pour more of who you are into your work. Your legacy is built one decision at a time.

- Naturally, your worth as a person transcends the value you create, but your work is the most visible expression of your priorities. As you consider your current body of work and the sum of the value you've created, isn't reflective of what you truly care about? Forget about your title, pay grade or how the world would rate your relative success or failure compared to what's considered normal. I found that the only way to effectively gauge my work is to answer the question: can I lay my head down tonight satisfied with the work I did today?
- Empty space wants to be filled, and where there is an absence of purposeful activity and meaningful progress, any activity that brings the paying of an immediate productivity will fill the void. With a lack of clear purpose to drive your work, efficiency often served plan's effectiveness, and it's possible to move ever faster without any sense of direction.
- Because we are biologically hardwired to form habits around rewarding activity, when we come petition goal or taste the sweet fruit of success, it's tempting to keep pushing the same levers over and over. However, this approach is often the fast track to mediocrity. The key to long-term success is a willingness to disrupt your own comfort for the sake of continued growth.
- In the scenario described above, I was falling prey to one of the most common pitfalls of creative work. In order to feel that I was making progress, I was there myself deeply into execution without considering how I was approaching my work, whether as even headed in the right direction, and if I was using the proper tools. I was leveraging one kind of work but ignoring the other two altogether.
- Making + meshing - mapping = drifter.
- The drifter greatly enjoys the process of making, and loves to develop his skills and engages curiosity— meshing, but is a poor planner—mapping. As a result, he frequently bounces from project to project and goes wherever his latest whim carries him. He has a good work ethic and may even be quite successful in short bursts, but his lack of strategic mapping means that there is a lot of wasted opportunity and little strategic progress. He lacks the conviction of a long-term plan. Because of his failure to map effectively, the drifter fails to follow through on many of his ideas and projects. He gets stuck and doesn't see things through to the end. He may have spotty success, but wonder why his work never seems to sustain itself.
- Meshing + mapping - making = dreamer.
- The final combination is the dreamer. He is upsets with ideas and personal growth—meshing, and strategic plans mapping, but lacks the conviction, courage or work ethic to put his plans in motion making. The dreamer is a talker, but he rarely accomplishes much. He can be effective when he wants to, but quickly loses interest and rarely finishes much of what he starts because he's always moving onto the next thing.

Chapter 3: the siren song of mediocrity.

- Principle: mediocrity doesn't just happen suddenly, develop slowly over time.
- This growth cycle is rapid and steep early in their career, when we are constantly facing unfamiliar challenges and in need of developing new skills to deal with them. However, as you progress in a career and accumulate more knowledge, there are fewer experiences that instinctively spark their curiosity and challenge us to rise to the occasion. We quickly grow stagnant, relying on our existing skills to perform our work. These skills may be sufficient, and depending on how innately talented you are, may even earn us a great amount of respect in the industry, but deep down we know that we are not doing our best work. We know we are coasting. We succumbed to mediocrity.
- However, with more at stake, you can also begin to experience a fear of choosing poorly.
- The term championed in the 1950s by the professor, author and researcher Herbert Simon captures the essence of this phenomenon: satisficing. It's the combination of the words "satisfied" and "sufficing," and means selecting an option that is sufficient to meet enough of our ongoing expectations. Simon explain that when dealing with limited resources and an environment of uncertainty, satisficing is sometimes a reasonable approach because our limited resources prohibit us from pursuing every possibility. Therefore, we settle for the best available option that meets most of our requirements.
- In 1999, the job search website monster.com launched a brilliant ad during the Super Bowl called "when I grow up." The ad featured a series of kids sharing their dreams, only with a twist.
 - "When I go, I want to file all day long.
 - I want to claw my way up to middle management X commission point
 - ... Replaced on a whim.
 - I want to have a brown nose.
 - I want to be a yes man!
- The ad finishes by asking the simple question "what did you want to be?" The subtext of the question, of course is that you didn't set out for any of these rules when you were young, so why do you settle for what now? Some would argue that the world is more complicated than this commercial suggests. After all, kids are completely unaware of things such as mortgages, organizational politics and recessions. True, but the fact remains that many people who start out with promise end up settling along the way for something less. They may rationalize that it is because of external forces, but the reality is that many of them sold themselves out in small ways over time and to they could no longer find a way back.
- No one charts a course for mediocrity, yet it's still a destination of choice. It's chosen and small ways over time, and those tiny, seemingly inconsequential decisions accumulate until they result in the state of crisis. By that point, making a change often feels overwhelming.
- The key to avoiding a slippery slope isn't just to work harder or longer, is to ensure that you are intentionally disrupting your own work rather than circling the wagons and protecting the ground you've already taken.
- When people begin to experience the level of mediocrity, they often question whether they are in the right job. They wonder if there might be another one out there that would better suit them, and that might give them the thrill they once experienced before things went south. They may even act on that impulse, hopping to another job or company, and subsequently find that everything is

better for a while. The newness is back, and that crave for sense of challenge has returned. Problem solved? Actually, no. In many of these situations the job hopper is right back in crisis within a matter of months. It's not that there's anything wrong with a new job, it's because they change their external situation without changing their mindset and methods. They were trying to solve an internal problem by changing the external circumstances, which rarely works. Yes to begin by finding ailment internally, then question your work environment.

- Seven deadly sins of mediocrity. To make them easier to remember up also named and organize them athletically, ABCDEFG.
- In order to be effective and contribute meaningfully, you need to apply points of traction in your life to prevent aimlessness from becoming the norm. You have to define the battles that are important to you, and align your resource to fight them.
- It's important to note that aimlessness does not mean the lack of drive to succeed. I've met many focused, talented, driven people who simply lack anything substantial that they could call a central theme for their work. Aimlessness means a general lack of cohesiveness within your day-to-day activities.
- The fires of your curiosity will help you identify important problems you may have previously overlooked. Problem finding it increasingly more critical than problem solving.
- Great work happens most consistently in the context of community.

Chapter 4: define your battles.

- Have you ever thought about what's truly important to you?
- It's your thesis statement. It's the Delta or the change that you wish to see in the world through your efforts.
- The most fulfilled people I've encountered in the marketplace approach their work, in any context, with the question "what can I add?" Rather than "what can I get?" They choose worthy battles, then engage in them with everything they have.
- Instead of asking "what would bring me enjoyment?" Which is how many people think about following their passion, we should instead ask "what work am I willing to suffer for today?"
- Great work requires suffering for something beyond yourself. It's created when you bend your life or on the mission and spend yourself on something you deem worthy of your best effort.
- What you want to identify is productive passion, the sort of passion that motivates you and is also beneficial to others. Productive passion is others focused, not self focused. It is what drives you to labor on the half of rather than simply satisfy your own needs.
- The fires you up, get your blood boiling, or otherwise creates in you and urgency to act? That the very important distinctions of compassionate anger.
- None of these people seemed by their own reports to be driven by the idea that their work would be fun and fulfilling—the standard way we think about passion—but they are willing to address certain problems, even at a great personal cost.
- As you survey your life, are the specific problems that you find yourself consistently gravitating toward? Are the issues that drive others to come to you for your help, and that you seem uniquely equipped to handle, even if it's at a personal cost to you?

- Where do you consistently see possibilities that others overlook? Where are you helplessly optimistic even in the face of overwhelming odds, to the point that you will continue to work long after others have given up?
- What do you know you should be doing, or have been ignoring? These are forgotten battle fronts. They are things that have been weighing on your mind for a while now, and things you care deeply about, but you've been ignoring because either—you fear that you won't have time for them or—you haven't defined them enough to know your next steps.
- Make a list of the things you know—deep down—you should be doing, but haven't taken action on. Include as many as you'd like—you don't have to do them all today.
- What do you see, hear, read or experience that fills you with compassionate anger? What does it mean for the battles you should be fighting?
- As you survey your life, at a specific problems that you find yourself consistently gravitating toward? Are these issues that drive others to come to you for help, and that you seem uniquely equipped to handle, even after it's at a personal cost to you?

Chapter 5: be fiercely curious.

- The saddest part is that when confronted with a topic other than work, they light up with enthusiasm and delight.
- The solution to the dilemma? Reclaim curiosity by embracing and engagement mindset rather than an entertainment mindset. This means dedicating yourself to the pursuit of new and better questions, a tuning your mind to dive deeply into important problems, and questioning the assumptions that sometimes limits fresh new perspectives.
- In my experience, conceptual blocks are not solved by knuckling down and trying to crank through the work. Rather, they are solved by asking different better questions.

Chapter 6: step out of your comfort zone.

- I've come to learn that, left unchecked, a default toward a more comfortable path. If I don't have an infrastructure that challenges me to grow, I'll end up doing whatever feels best in the moment, whether that means surfing the web when I should be strategizing, watching TV when I should be exercising, or avoiding a difficult conversation.
- At some point, you've probably been asked: what would you do if today were your last and earth? While a fun and well-intentioned exercise, it's not very beneficial in motivating action because it removes any sense of responsibility or commitment to others from the equation. If it's my last and earth, I'm going to spend/give away all my money, jump out of an airplane, eat the most unhealthy, but delicious food imaginable. Instead, when I'm with clients I like to pose a slightly different variant.
- Imagine for a moment that you will have a guest accompanying you throughout your day tomorrow. This person's task will be to follow you around from the moment you wake up into the moment you fall asleep. It will take copious notes about your schedule, how you interact with your family and friends, how you engage in your tasks and projects, and your mindset through it all. Once the day's over, this person will spend the next few days processing their observations, draw conclusions about your motivations, and compile their notes into a book about you that will stand as a definitive record of your life and work. How would you act differently tomorrow if you

knew that your actions and attitude on that one day were going to be a permanent testament to your life?

- Next I asked, “how does your imagine behavior compare with how you are actually living your life today? People nearly always admit that they aren’t living their life to their own standard of excellence. So why would knowing that we are being observed change how we engage? Knowing our actions are being accorded causes us to go outside our comfort zone and do what we know to be right rather than what feels right in the moment. It forces us to act rather than defer action.
- Dr. Karl Pillemer interviewed hundreds of people, he calls them experts due to their extensive life experience, who were later in life, and asked them to reflect on what they were most proud of and what they most regretted about their choices. The experts think her on this one point: say yes. As far as work is concerned, those experts who were happiest about their careers can point to a decision where they were tempted to say no, where staying the course was more comfortable and less risky, but they finally decided to give it a go. He continued, my interviews make clear that the experts who took a risk at a crucial juncture where those who looked back with the greatest satisfaction on their work lives. For many of the most successful elders, the say yes attitude formed the core approach to work.
- They refuse to move until the gatekeepers give them permission. Excellence is an about working extra hard to do what you’re told. It’s about taking the initiative to do work you decide is worth doing. This is revolutionary.

Chapter 7: know yourself.

- Recognition for work is the highest form of currency. This may drive you to do anything necessary to get credit for your work, or may cause you to gravitate towards the line of work where you’ll receive the largest amount of the steam. In the above example, this may have been what caused me to so blatantly and perhaps unwittingly, hide the credit for what was ultimately your work. If this is a narrative you unknowingly believe, then he might focus only on activities we got a lot of immediate feedback and subsequently failed to engage in important but largely invisible work that has longer-term payoff. May also be more likely to judge the results of your work based solely on the feedback of others, and lose touch with your own gauge of excellence.
- Have you ever been listening to someone speak, or experiencing a work of art they made, and you suddenly find that your pulses quickening, your breathing is getting more intense, and you can barely control your excitement? You want to shout yes and let them know that you agree with every word coming out of their mouth. If so, even experienced the phenomenon I’ve refer to resonance, and it can be a valuable clue on the Pats performing your best, most unique work.
- As you read, pay close attention to the attributes they exhibit that you would like to emulate in your own life. Try to be as specific as possible and avoid vague concepts and generalities. For example, instead of courageous, think willing to stand against the masses. Instead of creative, think willing to ask counterintuitive questions. These are actionable qualities rather than vague personality traits.

Chapter 8: be confidently adaptable.

- You can accomplish anything in life, provided that you do not mind who gets the credit. — Harry Truman.

- This morning I was upstairs packing for a trip when I suddenly heard a series of comes from below. It sounded like someone had tossed a suitcase down the basement stairs, until after moment of silence, I heard an unmistakable wail of pain from our eight-year-old. I leaped on two flights of stairs, taking them multiple at a time, soon standing over the scene of my wife tried to console our son, who sitting at the base of the 12 step staircase. After some interrogation, and realizing our son was fine save for a few bumps and bruises, we asked him what happened. “I was trying to jump all the stairs two at a time, and I slipped and fell.” What was my first instinct? In that moment, I was tempted to blurt out a new edict forced their way behavior and our home: thou shalt not climb stairs and multiples. It doesn’t matter that this was a one-time event, and that our children have had no other stairway injuries despite multiple opportunities. This one incident inspired an instinct to create a rule when none had previously been required. Why?
- Our first instinct, when facing a near disaster, is to attempt to create rules of behavior that will regulate the uncertainty. It’s much easier to make a rule than the attempt to cultivate wisdom. Naturally, some rules are necessary, but in this case the rule wasn’t really for the benefit of my children, it was for me.
- The fact that my son had clearly learned his lesson the hard way and was unlikely to repeat this behavior. I’ve experienced this same dynamic in organizational life. Something goes wrong, and the first instinct is to establish a regulation or policy to ensure it never happens again. Never mind that it was a one-time occurrence, or that the parties involved were appropriately dealt with, a new rule regarding behavior will make everyone feel safer. Except it doesn’t. It’s actually quite the opposite, because in making rules to govern group behavior we often unwittingly remove the need for personal accountability.
- The problem with this approach is that soon the rules become so pervasive that they are meaningless. Rather than trusting that my son had gained a bit of wisdom from this mishap that would thereby change his future behavior, I imposed a rule that removes the need for personal responsibility and individual learning.
- Rather than striving for control, we should instead be striving for influence.
- Their best strategy is to seek ways of making everyone else’s job easier. This requires that they adopt a mindset of service rather than one of entitlement.
- One way to route yourself in reality is to conduct a regular SW OT analysis. This stands for: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats.
- Strengths: what unique value in my able to add consistently? What have I recently discovered that good at?
- Weaknesses: what activities and Mike consistently poor at, despite my best effort? Is there way to improve my skills in the more crucial areas where am failing?
- Opportunities: where do I have the most potential to add value over the coming weeks or months? How can I position myself to do so?
- Threats: where my most vulnerable, and where do I have the most likely chance of failing over the coming term? How can I mitigate the chance of failure?

Chapter 9: find your voice.

Chapter 10: stay connected.

- There's a false belief that tranquility equals health, but a tranquil team is often a sign of imminent death because it may mean that no one cares enough to make waves.
- In a mid-1990s interview, just prior to returning to Apple, Steve Jobs shared a story about an experience he had as a youth that echoed his beliefs about how healthy teams should function. One day a neighbor invited Jobs into his garage, where he revealed a rock tumbler. He asked Steve to go into the backyard and collect a few rocks, and then the neighbor took the rocks, which were normal ones with rough edges, and place them into the tumbler along with some grit. After flipping the switch to start the machine, he told Jobs to return the next day. The following day, the neighbor stopped the tumbler and removed "amazingly beautiful polished rocks. The same common stones that had gone in, the rubbing against each other, \creating a little bit of friction, creating a little bit of noise, had come out these beautiful polished rocks." Jobs went on to explain how this metaphor informed how he believed they products were made. He said, "it sets through the team, through that group of incredibly talented people bumping up against one another, having arguments, having fight sometimes, making some noise, and working together they polish each other and they polish the ideas, and what comes out are these beautiful stones."
- Instead, set aside time for your team, with those you manage, or with your manager and peers to have an in-depth conversation about how you are doing the work rather than just conversations about the mechanics of the work, which is where the most teams excessively focus.

Chapter 11: live empty.

Chapter 12: forward.

- A friend once shared with me that his son was experiencing some paralysis about what to do with his life. He said he sensed an inner pressure to try to do something great, and to really make a mark in the world. My friend paused for a moment, then turned to his son and asked, "How many great people can you name? Let's start with US presidents. That's easy, there are less than 50 of them." His son is able to name several, but nowhere near all of them. After that, my friend asked him to list all the other great people he could recall. Finally, he had to jump in and help his son with the list. In all, my friend guessed, they could probably name close to 100 people before it started getting really difficult. "Okay, so let's think about this for a minute, you can name about 100 people throughout all history who meet your criteria of being great. Keep me to tell me that you are making it your ambition in life to try to be a number 101? Is that where you're going for?" He encouraged his son to focus less on the perceptions of others and instead on finding an interesting feel to work in.
- In the interview she says that when she was a child her father made it a habit to ask on a regular basis, "What did you fail at this week?" When she replied, nothing, he would retort, "oh... That's too bad." Of this rituals she says, my definition of failure became not trying, not the outcome.
- In the past, successful people are typically those who were good problem solvers. They could take a disparate bits of data, crunch them, and weave them together and an elegant solution to the problem. Over the next several decades, people who are especially adept problem finding will define the world of work. These are people who are intensely curious and willing to apply their cognitive abilities to exploring the gray zone adjacent to existing opportunities until they identify a vein of gold.