



Scott

Playing For Keeps

A Young Artist's Guide to Going Pro Without Going Broke

By Scott Ginsberg

You've chosen an uncertain path.
You've adopted an inconvenient lifestyle.
And you've decided to go your own way.

But if you want to arrive in one piece – and one peace – you have to delete the amateurism out of your life.

This is the critical crossroads – the emotional turning point – in the life of a young artist.

I've been there myself. *I'm still there myself.*

And it turns out, when you're ready to play for keeps; your work will never be the same.

It's time to show the world that your art isn't just another expensive hobby.

Dabbling is done.

With this 90-day digital devotional, let the dedication begin.

1. **Access is everything.** It's impossible to matter in a void. If we want to win, we need an audience. Otherwise we're just winking in the dark. Fortunately, our work is no longer limited to living in one place. Thanks to the web, access is the new currency. Thanks to the web, we can reach anyone, anytime, anywhere. Artists who used to be chained to a single gallery now have multiple entry points to their marketplace. Businesses whose sole distribution used to be limited to a few channels now have the advantage of infinite digital shelf space. Foundations whose financial support used to flow from a few wealthy donors now have access to social microfunding worldwide. Access doesn't lead to the value – access is the value. *Are you offering it?*

2. **Act decisively on your creative talents.** If you're not doing the work for yourself, get out now. Courting approval puts a dangerous amount of power in the hands of the audience. And exposing your work too soon and to the wrong eyes will hurt its chances of growing into what it needs to be. Plus, it sets you up for debilitating disappointment. Look: Art isn't a game of kickball. You don't have to wait to get picked to play. My suggestion: Pick yourself. Stop waiting for a publisher. Stop letting the market call the tune. Stop standing by for rejection. Stop insisting that someone who doesn't matter validate your work. And stop wondering what people will think of you once they see your work. If the world's not ready for your feelings, tough shit. Stay governed by the law of your own being instead of waiting for the masses to tell you your work is okay. Just do it yourself. The fruits of your bravery will not go unnoticed. *Are you pushing rocks up hills or rolling snowballs down hills?*

3. **Avoid clichés like the plague.** Alan Fetcher once said, “Stroke cliché until it purrs like a metaphor.” And if you want to put that advice into play, you have to go back to official definition of the word *cliché* – a bankrupt idea. That’s all it is. Which means the idea still has potential, but only if you use it wisely. The secret is to reinvest in the cliché. To put some cash back into its account and leverage it in a way that is unexpected. As a writer, I conduct this transaction daily. I find something I can play against – then violate the expectation to prove my point. For example: Curiosity killed the cat, but it also made me a lot of money. It’s not who you know, it’s whose life is better because they know you. The best way to bring home the bacon is to raise your own pigs. And if you don’t know where you’re going, nobody can stop you. See the trend? I wonder what would happen if you were unafraid to revisit old ideas. I wonder how customers would react if you stood ideas on their head. Remember: When you give an old idea a new twist, you deepen its meaning and extend its potential. Be confident enough to borrow from the past, but be smart enough to build into the present. *Are you too cool for cliché?*

4. **Allow everything you encounter to shape you.** As an artist, I have a profound hunger for meaning. I've developed an acute sensitivity to my immediate environment. And I prepare myself not to walk away empty handed, wherever I go. What can I say? *It's in the job description.* And I think anyone who pursues an artistic endeavor needs to do the same. Otherwise their creative bank account overdrafts. I'm reminded of the recent remake of *Sherlock Holmes*. In the opening scene of the movie, Robert Downey, Jr. grabs the arm of attacker, stopping the invisible dagger millimeters before slicing Watson's jugular. "How did you see that?" Watson gasps. "Because I was looking for it," Holmes replies. What are you looking for? What are you listening to? After all, that which goes unsought goes undetected. The cool part is: When you approach life in this way – as a sponge, as a mental omnivore – your experience become living laboratory that never goes obsolete. And if you're smart enough to vibrate with that bliss, the world will refuse to pass you by. *What shapes you?*

5. **Always keep kindling handy.** Art is more than just what you do – this stuff has to be your life. If you don't think what you're creating is the greatest thing that ever was, you're finished. If you don't think your art matters in a massive way, you're finished. And if you don't think your work is going to change the world forever, you're finished. The key is to find private strategies to keep up your original enthusiasm. Two questions I've found helpful to ask are, "What injustice did you set out to fight when you first started?" and "What was the impulse that initially got you excited you about what you do?" Those aren't questions – those are time machines. And they work. If you want to stay up, stay true and stay fueled, you have to constantly rekindle that original fire. Otherwise your passion will degenerate into a line item. *How do you replenish your energy reserve?*

6. **Anonymity is bankruptcy.** Artists who play for keeps are the ones who spend just as much time marketing their work as they do making it. Otherwise all their hard labor adds up to nothing but a mere wink in the dark. However, that doesn't mean you need a marketing plan – it means you need a visibility plan. It means you need is to find something that you can create scarcity around that people will pay for. And not because you're trying to trick people into buying something – but because you're trying to make something worth buying and spreading. As my friend Mark says, "Every product must be sold." Don't feed me the Van Gough defense. I know he only sold one painting in his life. He also lived in abject poverty, experienced severe depression and committed suicide at the age of thirty-seven. And you're not Van Gough. *Get selling or get another career.* Remember: People have to make time to visit the world you created. And when they get there, they're buying your person, your philosophy, your process and then your product. *Are you selling all four?*

7. **Art is subordinate to life.** Being an artist isn't just about the art. It's about the unique life you choose to lead – and the unique identity you choose to own – that informs and inspires the art. As such, art is the residue of a life fully lived. As I learned in the aforementioned *Art & Fear*, “When you are lazy, your art is lazy; when you hold back, it holds back; and when you hesitate, it stands there staring, with hands in its pockets. But when you commit, it comes on like blazes.” Lesson learned: Forget about self-expression and focus on creating a self to express. Because your art is not some discharge left when you subtract all the things you haven't done – it's the full payoff for the adventurous life you've lived. If you want to let the canvas become the extension of your artist's spirit, try this: Search the world for meaning constantly and aggressively, give yourself room to respond authentically, and then draw a line from your life to your art. *Every single day.* You'll never be blocked again. And the work you produce will move the world. Remember: Your music can't blast out of your instrument unless it's been born in your life first. *Are you creating art, or living a creative life and taking notes?*

8. **Art that mirrors, matters.** Botticelli was Davinci's mentor. And during an interview about his student's work, he said, "It will reward the viewer from any angle." Does your art meet people where they are? Does your art make people's own experience available to them? Because that's the whole point: Art's purpose is to remind people that they're not alone. That they're not the only ones having an experience. Next time you sit down to create, don't write, paint or draw – breathe life onto the page. Create an infection that leaves the viewer better. Turn your art into a mirror in which people can see their own reflection, and you will make your name dear to history. *Does your art recognize the pain in its patron?*

9. **Art without point of view, isn't.** Your art needs to do something beside decorate a wall. As an artist, your job is to declare a different way to think about living. As an artist, your purpose is to reorganize the world in ways that are more just. As an artist, your obligation is to artist is to express what you feel strongest about. And as an artist, your goal is to signify the spirit of the times by telling stories of the voiceless. Otherwise you're just a fad with legs. In the words of legendary film composer and music producer, Hans Zimmer: "A good score should have a point of view all of its own. It should transcend all that has gone before; stand on its own two feet and still serve the movie. A great soundtrack is all about communicating with the audience, but we all try to bring something extra to the movie that is not entirely evident on screen." *How will you avoid the inevitable downward spiral to commodity?*

10. **Art without risk, isn't.** Tolstoy once said that art is an infection. Interestingly, the word “infect” comes from the Latin root “to put into.” Which brings up a key question: What does your art put into its viewer? Because if people walk away from your work uninfected, you failed. As I learned from *Linchpin*, if the gift of your art doesn't change someone for the better, it's not art – it's a commodity. The best suggestion I can make is: *Bare it*. Infection will be inevitable. Like I told a recent mentoring client, “The minute you feel yourself reaching for that delete button, leave it in. Keep your work bloody.” The point is: People want you to matter to them. They want your work to change them for the better. Figure out what you want to infect people with, and make sure it seeps through every micro-moment. *How naked are you willing to be?*

11. **Artists are gift givers.** Everyday I write what I write without knowing if someone is going to pay for it. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. But while money is nice, part of being an artist is accepting payment in the form of how your art changes people. That's what gifts do. And as I learned from *Linchpin*, if your art is a gift so valuable that nobody could adequately repay you, people will be eager to pay for the privilege of being in the room with you. That's the bet a creator makes, says Seth Godin. That when you give away something for free, it will be discovered, attract attention, spread and then lead to some portion of the masses actually buying something. But it has to start with the gift. With the intention of deploying your work because it makes you happy. *Are you making art to make money or make meaning?*

12. **Artists who don't sell, suffer.** I once met a romance novelist at a writer's conference. We got on the subject of book marketing, branding and the like. And when I asked her which channel she found to be the most profitable for promotion, she said something I'll never forget: "I write books – I don't sell them." That pretty much ended our conversation. Because clearly, that woman had zero understanding of what it means to play for keeps. Yes, you're an artist. But you're also a salesman. And if you're not there to sell, you're just a visitor. Believe me, I'd rather jump out of a burning building in my boxer shorts than make a sales call. But it's part of the artistic package. Every product must be sold. Beware of sliding into an entitlement attitude that assumes your art will sell itself. *When was the first time someone took you seriously as a salesperson?*

13. **Ask for the sale.** Artists aren't typically the best salespeople. Most experience physical pain when they're forced to assign monetary value to their intellectual and creative property. But, as Jason Fried wrote in a recent issue of *Inc.*, "Never be afraid to put a price on something. If you pour your heart into something and make it great, sell it – for real money. Even if there are free options, even if the market is flooded with free, people will pay for things they love." The cool part is, charging for something makes you want to make it better, says Fried. Which means your product is going to improve by virtue of people paying for it. Which means over time, they're going to pay more for it. Cool. Here's my suggestion: Never apologize for your pricing. You deserve to be compensated commensurate with your value. State your feel confidently and shut up. Because he who speaks next, loses. You just have to believe that people love to pay for what they love – your work. *Are you asking them to open their wallets?*

14. **Audience is everything.** Shakespeare didn't open in twenty countries. He had one theater, one audience. The people cherished the art. The artist cherished their attention. And together, they made something magical. Outside of that sacred space, nothing else mattered. Of course, that was four hundred years ago. A lot has changed since the Renaissance. Or has it? Maybe not as much as we want to believe. Because when you consider what technology has enabled, what culture has created and how information has evolved, Shakespeare's artistic approach is more relevant than ever. Now, we can figure out which of the mainstream hoops are not worth the time, money and effort to jump through – then forge ahead without stopping. Just ask Derek Sivers of CD Baby. Now, we can stop buying tickets for the starving artist lottery and go out and create the market for what we love – even if it's a small one. Just ask Hugh McLeod of Gaping Void. Now, we can run into the corners, nooks and crannies, make something we love for the people who love us – and do pretty well. Just ask Kevin Smith of Smodcast. Now, we can focus our time on creating brilliant work that speaks to people in a way they have never been spoken to before – and change everything. *Will you continue waiting around for the masses, waiting for the revolution to begin?*

15. Balance creative needs with survival needs. The art is essential.

For the sake of your sanity, you must yield to the devout motions of the soul. But for the sake of your survival, you also have to yield to the devout motions of the mortgage. The secret is to hone in on which of your artistic efforts are the most income generating. *Not just fun. Not just cool. Not just creative.* But the specific actions that physically put money into your bank account on a predictable basis so you continue to make the art you want to make. And you have to prioritize those efforts over the majority of your daily endeavors, save your actual creative time. Otherwise you're going to end up sitting on the floor surrounded by piles of your own work, eating beans out of a can with nothing to show for it. Look: You can't just write all day. Eventually, you've got to get your ass out there and make some money. *What consumes your time that isn't making you any money?*

16. **Be a total control freak.** In the book *Catching the Big Fish*, David Lynch explains that it's a joke to think that a movie is going to mean anything if somebody else fiddles with it. "The filmmaker should decide on every single element. Otherwise it won't hold together. Even if the film sucks, at least you made it suck on your own." That's the challenge every artist faces: *Securing sovereignty over your work*. Attaining the freedom to create what you want to create. And what's sad is that too many of us surrender this sovereignty. We're afraid to let our voice ring out. So we allow people to edit us. And then we wonder why we're grossly disappointed with the final product. "If you do what you believe in and have a failure, that's one thing. You can still live with yourself," Lynch said. "But if you don't have the final cut – and then the movie fails – it's like dying twice. And it's very, very painful." Listen to the man: Don't give away your power supply. Have obsessive faith in yourself. Control everything. Because when you believe in yourself this much, you begin to calculate the odds differently. And that's how you execute the work that matters. *Whom are you allowing to edit your work?*

17. **Be afraid – be very afraid.** One of the prerequisites of the artistic journey is acquiring the aptitude to embrace the unknown. To overcome the paralyzing fear of failure. To tear yourself away from the safe harbor of certainty, stare into the abyss and keep going. John Keats referred to this skill as “negative capability,” or the power to remain in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts without any fact or reason. That’s how true artists play for keeps: They accept fear as an inevitable part of the equation. And they understand that fear is acceptable as long as it’s proportionate to the situation. My suggestion: Stop trying to stamp out uncertainty. Instead, make friends with it. Figure out what it’s trying to teach you about yourself. That’s how you convert ambiguity into ammo. Because as much as the advertisers would love for you to believe it, life is not a sports drink commercial. People who have no fear are either liars or robots. Truth is: Courage isn’t acting without fear – it’s acting beyond it. If you want to make art that matters, consider that the world isn’t trying to knock you down – it’s trying to educate you. Stop freaking out and just listen. *How will you use fear as a compass?*

18. **Be emotionally ready for success.** Becoming too successful, too fast, too early will either turn you into an arrogant prick or cause you to burn out. Or both. That's what I learned the hard way: While money loves speed, velocity creates stress – and stress kills people. Hell, it almost killed me. When I started my career as a writer, I lacked the emotional foundation to support my (unexpected) early successes. And as a result, I ended up in the hospital with a collapsed lung and a tube in my chest. Gasp. Your challenge is to pace yourself. To get rich slowly. To avoid getting sucked into the addictive vortex of success and achievement. Otherwise complacency will erase what you've worked so hard to achieve. My friend Jason Koteki writes and cartoons extensively on this very topic. In a popular blog post, he wrote the following: "It's alarming how often we chase down the secrets to success without ever stopping to consider the side effects of the ideas we are so eager to implement. We can drive ourselves crazy in that pursuit, and we can drive away the people we love the most while we do it." Bottom line: Working at a breakneck pace works for about six weeks. After that, you can't bullshit your body and you can't fool your family. Just be careful what you begin. Otherwise you'll be so busy fighting your inner battles that you won't have time to execute any art, much less share that art with the people who matter most. *Are you monitoring your momentum?*

19. **Be more selfish with your work.** Everything I write is a conversation with myself. *I write to me, and I write for me.* And to my surprise, that's precisely what makes it so readable. In fact, I once received an email from a reader who thought I was stalking her. She said my work directly related to her life, almost as if I was in the office with her on a daily basis. Which is ridiculous. I only showed up once a week. The point is, the more personal your material, the more universal your message. If you want to play for keeps, play for you. Life's too short to enroll yourself in a system bent to the desires of others. Plus, when you're selfish with your art, when you make it for you and nobody else, the passion you bring to the work will carry it to market. And even if it doesn't, at least you still like it. As Miles Davis once said, "An artist's first responsibility is to himself." *Are you following the script people envisioned for you, or follow your own artistic inclinations?*

20. **Believe you're worthy of your own dream.** It's easy to become hypnotized by the horizon of other people's expectations. That's a personal virus every artist has to fight. But life's too short to acquiesce to the norm. And pursuing something that someone convinced you that you should want is a recipe for misery. Instead of flagrantly supporting the status quo by clinging to an inherited dream as a fixture of absolute truth, do what you want. Listen to your own voice the loudest. In the words of Joseph Campbell, "The minute you take the dictation of the time instead of the dictation of your own eternity, you have capitulated to the devil, and you're in hell." You don't need excessive reassurance – you need to stick your fingers in your ears. Freedom means never having to bury your desire. *Are you being the real you or trying to impress an invisible jury?*

21. **Boldness is required to move forward.** People who need certainty in their lives are less likely to ship, shatter the status quo and use their art to disturb the world into something better. And understandably, avoiding the unknown has considerable survival value. Just look at nature: Animals that leave the flock and go their own way get eaten. But the reality is, fear is a barrier that shields you from the kinds of naked experience that fuels the art that matters most. Uncertainty is the real asset. The true companion of successful art making. Your challenge is to go at your work in a way that freaks you out. To take the plunge with your clothes still on and trust that you'll figure out how to swim before the water fills your lungs. Don't give your fears the dignity of silence. Burn safe art. Walk to the edge of the precipice. Switch off your rational mind and give yourself license to explore without a map. *Are you fighting feelings of uncertainty or surfing on the waves of discomfort?*

22. **Brand your honesty.** Here's my official definition of writing: "Slice open a vein and bleed your truth all over the page." This distinction is core to my work because, in my experience, bloody art gives audiences access to their truest inmost selves. It meets them where they are. It rewards them from any angle. Unfortunately, honest art scares people. Apparently not everybody is ready for the truth. But the cool part is: The more personal your work is, the more universal your appeal is; and the more universal your appeal is, the more your fans relate to it. It's almost spooky how that works. But that's what people love. Art that fails to be autobiographical, on the other hand, usually falls short. It remains flat and uninspiring. Your challenge, if you want to strike a consistent cord of novelty, is to spin the work out yourself. To write with your pen dipped in your own blood, pulling your voice from where your pain lives. No need to justify your hungers. No need to defend your obsessions. Just let your art be an extension of yourself, and it will infect the people who matter most. *What are you doing to keep your work honest?*

23. **Break out of the deadlock.** A book that every artist needs to read is called *Mental Traps*, by Andre Kukula. It explores how chronic indecision, monumental overplanning and endless anticipation cripple your artistic and earning capacity. Here's a rapid-fire list of suggestions that flipped a few internal switches in my artist's heart: Stop attending to project when they're not calling for your attention. Stop carrying around a scenario for everything. Stop scrubbing the world clean of surprise. Stop remaining perpetually ahead of yourself. Stop killing yourself trying to accomplish an outdated goal. In short, the book reminds us that life isn't one prefigured scenario after another. It's not an endless stream of things to get over. *Are you stand on your tiptoes to foresee the future, or grounding your heels into the earth and make love to the present moment?*

24. **Bring yourself into risk territory.** In the book *Wisdom*, Robert Redford cautions, “Once you begin thinking about security, you begin to erode yourself as an artist and stop being able to take the risks you need to take.” That’s the challenge: You have to be willing to step across the lines of safety and to accept the surprises of the outcome. Otherwise your work remains stale and uninspired. Nothing but a series of boring reproductions doomed to disappoint. Personally, I find that it’s helpful to create a filter. A ritual that audits the level of risk in your creative endeavors. Two questions you might ask are: “What do I risk in releasing this work?” and “Who will this piss off?” By doing so, you bring risk to the frontline of your artistic awareness. And the work you execute speaks with a daring voice that’s impossible to ignore. Your challenge is to customize your own practice. Whatever it takes to sustain your status as an agent of chaos. Remember: Art without risk, isn’t. *Do you dare your genius to walk the unknown path?*

25. Carry your own standards for judging your artistic talents.

Never let the validity of your talent hang in the balance of some critic's opinion. Employ only the approval of your heart. Create out of pleasure, not under constraint. Otherwise your art suffers the consequences of external expectation. And before you know it, people who don't matter pilfer your life without you even knowing it. The key decision point is figuring out whom to ignore. Because whether or not you want to admit it: Not everybody wants you to become successful. And not everybody will be happy for your success. In fact, outside of those who really, really love you – your success will piss most people off. And it will drum up significant resentment, even if it's never vocalized. My suggestion: Stay undeterred when people attack you for exercising your ability. Proactively pursue your own path despite *lack of popular appreciation and understanding*. Even when people try to push boulders into your path. *Why are you still listening to those trying to talk your dreams down?*

26. **Change your relationship to fear.** If you're never scared of anything, there's something wrong. And if you're not terrified in your artistic pursuits, you're not reaching enough. Fear is a healthy, human reality. It's an essential part of the creative experience. And if you're trying to scrub your world clean of it, you'll never reach your full potential. The secret is threefold: First, to admit that you're scared shitless every day of your life. And to be okay with that. Second, to make friends with your fear. Offer respect to it, give thanks for it and learn lessons from it. Lastly, to overwhelm fear with faith. To believe in yourself, your resources, your abilities, your foundation – and humanity – down to your toes. That's how fear becomes fuel. After all, it's not meant to be ignored; it's meant to be invested. *Do you fear the fear of fear?*

27. **Commitment trumps discipline.** Here's the biggest misconception about me: *I'm not really that disciplined – I'm just obsessively focused on what's really important.* Turns out, when you actively cultivate the purpose driven nature of your work, discipline becomes a non-thought. That's how commitment works: It deletes distraction. It makes you wake up early. It turns habits into non-negotiables. And when you're committed, you drop everything and get to work. Every day. That's the reality about being an artist: The work is always an outgrowth of who you are. Your deepest values. Your personal constitution. And if there isn't a shade of significance in the work, it will never get done. Remember: Discipline derives from the wellspring of why. If you truly want to play for keeps, you have to play every day. And the game has to be meaningful to you. Otherwise, you lose. *What will your commitments enable you to do?*

28. **Complacency is the hallmark of comfort.** As an artist, your title fight is never as important as defending it. That's the peril of victory: When you're the challenger, nobody sees you coming. You have the element of surprise on your side. But when you're the champ, everybody does. And because they know what you're capable of, they throw everything they've got at you. This is a dangerous incarnation of resistance. And if you're not careful, it will beat you senseless. That's why I put everything I've got into anything I write. Every sentence is an innovation. Every sentence has my entire life behind it. And every sentence is coated with as much blood as possible. Because I know that if I don't get a fraction better with each one I write, I do my readers a disservice. Real artists stay hungry. They root out any sense of entitlement. Otherwise complacency knocks them out in the first round. *Are you too comfortable?*

29. **Confidence opens checkbooks.** If you're in art, you're in sales. Period. You have to show the world your wares and ask them to give you money for it. Otherwise you're just winking in the dark. And this doesn't come easy for a lot of artists, myself included. Personally, I hate the business side of art. I don't care about making money. I could care less about closing sales. And the mere thought of quoting a price for one of my pieces makes me want to ram my head through a steel wall. But selling is part of the job description. And if you don't make peace with that reality, you will cripple your earning capacity. As George Plimpton observed in *Writers At Work*, "You can't set art off in a corner." The secret is to get good at stating your fee. Whether you're a performer, writer, painter or singer, here's the rule: Speak with uncompromising language. Be unapologetic. State your fee confidently – then shut up. Otherwise you'll spend the rest of your life donating your work to charity auctions. *Do you feel guilty for demanding compensation for your value?*

30. **Consciously engineer your artistic environment.** Otherwise you'll never cultivate the conditions for creativity to expand. Here's how: First, direct the traffic flow of your own overcrowded mind. Give yourself quiet time every single day. Second, you need a place where you can be whoever you want to be. A consequence free space for experimentation. Third, surround yourself with ongoing sources of raw energy. Whether you work best in public or in private, constantly engage all of your senses. Let your artist's spirit soar. Fourth, cultivate an acute sense of when disinclination is around the corner. Discover what frustrates your ambitions. And don't be afraid to let resistance win every once in a while. It demonstrates humility for the process and motivates you to return with strength. Finally, create a policy for managing compositional paralysis. Know when you've got it, know when you've lost it, know when there's no way in hell you're going to get it, and know when you're going to have to take measures to get it back. Remember: Your style is defined by your habits; your habits are defined by your values. *How can you live your life in a way that your art gets done over and over?*

31. **Continuity builds credibility.** Anyone can publish something good. But only a real artist can do it every day. That's what separates people who make money from people who make history: They're not writing a book – they're contributing to an ongoing body of work. They're not painting a picture – they're aggregating a lifelong portfolio. And they're not cutting a record – they're leaving behind an artistic legacy that, when people write the history books, it will be impossible to leave out. The hard part is slogging through what matters. Going to work everyday, knowing that you might not get it every day. I like the way creative writing professor Junot Diaz puts it: “In my view a writer is a writer because even when there is no hope, even when nothing you do shows any sign of promise, you keep writing anyway.” Remember: Don't give up the moment before the miracle shows up. Consistency is far better than rare moments of greatness. *What's your daily gift to the world?*

32. **Cost is real.** Art is expensive. Not for the customer to buy, but for the creator to make. It costs more time than we'd like to devote, more friends that we'd care to lose, more sweat than we'd expect to wield, more money that we'd wish to spend and more annoyances that we'd care to put up with. It costs more anxiety that we'd prefer to manage, more uncertainty that we'd care to tolerate, more money that we'd want to spend, more criticism than we'd choose to draw and more blood that we'd hope to shed. It costs more pain than we'd like to endure, more pressure than we'd prefer to absorb, more expectation than we'd care to handle, more energy than we'd want to invest and more bandwidth than we'd wish to consume. And we never see it coming. There's no manual, no class or no college degree that forewarns us about the gory realities of professional artistry. It's easier to romanticize an idealized lifestyle than confront the hell of taking the road less traveled. But if want to play for keeps, we have to know what's at stake. We have to understand what our art expects of us. And we have to prepare for the inevitable waves of complexity that come our way. If it were cheap, it wouldn't be art. *What costs is your business unwilling to incur?*

33. Create a mythology around your art. When brandtag was released, I worked just as hard on the promo video as I did on the art itself. And here's why: People are buying more than just your work; they're buying the humble beginnings that first ignited your work. *Did you live in your car? Traveled to Africa alone? Work tirelessly out of your garage with your business partner? Shack up with your parents for two years, eight months and twenty-nine days?* Awesome. Find the unique experience that first fueled your creative work and package and deliver it. Ideally, in the form of a creation myth. This infects people with your vision, helps them see the world as you do and enables them to join your brand – not just buy it. As cartoonist Hugh Macleod wrote, “We humans seem to need creation myths, somehow. They manage to articulate who we really are, somehow. They help explain our core values, somehow. And for whatever reason, really successful people are even more likely to have them, even more likely to need them, somehow.” *What's your Garden of Eden?*

34. Create a space where it's impossible to hide from yourself.

Some days I wish I were delusional. It would probably make things a lot easier. But I can't stomach it. *Literally*. I know what happens to my body when I lie to myself. And it's simply not worth it. Turns out, looking away from what you need to face causes more anxiety than actually facing it. That's why I write morning pages, first thing, every day of my life: They keep me from getting away with self-evasion. They align me with things that will never lie to me. And they enable me to meet myself and not turn away. My suggestion: Build structure around yourself to make sure you remember to do that consistently. Honor the existence of what you've been evading. Then, engage in a regular practice of healthy self-confrontation. After all, artistic originality is an ongoing process of staying true to yourself. And if you never face the page, you'll never know who you really are. Maybe it's time to call yourself out on the carpet and induce a little self-squirming. *When was the last time you laid your world bare?*

35. **Creativity is forever.** Maya Angelou once said, “The more creativity you use, the more you have.” Here’s a rapid-fire list of strategies to make sure you never run out: First, go to the edge of your field of vision. Transcend the conventional boundaries of your craft. Like the writer who takes a painting class. Second, keep your complex engine of experience well oiled and fully serviced. Make an investment in your future interestingness by saying yes to every new experience. And vigorously pursue avenues that enhance your sensibility and enliven your spirit. Third, never deplete your reservoir of curiosity, your databank of possibility and your arsenal of ingredients. Restock them by finding value in the discarded. By seeking out the inherent novelty in everything you encounter. Fourth, practice seeing the potential in the ordinary. The memorable in the mundane. Attend to every idea you discover with deep democracy. And believe there is no such thing as a bad idea. Fifth, put your mind in a state where it is willing to accept. Surrender control of the creative process. And remember that your art comes through you, not from you. Last, turn off your conscious mind. Go perpendicular to the task at hand. Rely on your brain to do the work for you while you’re engaged in something else. *How will you enable the art that matters to bubble to the surface?*

36. **Deliver the higher value.** If your work puts names to things people already know in their hearts, you take them to a place they don't want to leave. If your work traps a moment of life in its full beauty and shouts it from the rooftops, you enact a revival of spirit. And if your work gives people hope about what they can be, you force them to look at new horizons. That's art that matters. And if you can focus on making a real contribution and allowing your audience to decide how to repay you, it will be worth it in the end. On other hand, if your job sets a cap on how much you're allowed to give, run. Because what you sell has to supplement the soul, not just hang on the wall. *Does your work reaches down inside and reward what it means to be human?*

37. Develop deeper trust in your own instincts. Feedback is highly overrated. It rarely reflects who you are as an artist. More often than not, it just projects the insecure concerns and character flaws of the person giving it. In my experience: Unless it comes from the small group of who truly matter most, it's nothing but a confusing, discouraging, stressful waste of time and tears. What's more, spending too much time living in other people's worlds leads you away from your own voice. Look: You can only be bounced around like a pinball for so long. And life's too short to create art in response to demands of the market. Is there something that keeps scraping away inside of you? Good. *Use that.* Stop worrying about which shelf your book belongs to. Just write the damn thing. Stop stressing over which genre your music is classified as. Just sing your face off. Love yourself enough to honor the demands of the gift inside of you. Make the art you care about. Expose the place where you really live. And if people don't like it, tough shit. *Their loss.* Believe in your heart that the people who matter most, will. *How much of the world's best art came from a committee?*

38. **Don't find inspiration – beguile it.** With the right lens, the right posture and the right filter, inspiration will seek you out. All you have to install new awareness plans. I learned about this process from obscure book on creativity called *Playful Perception*, by Herbert Leff. He defines an “awareness plan” as a procedure or mental recipe for perceiving and thinking about the world around us. Here are my favorite examples: Contemplate special contributions each thing makes to life. Envision what's going on inside everything you notice. Regard whatever you're doing as a game. See things as events and not objects frozen in a moment of time. And view everyday things as if they were art exhibits. By changing the way you experience the world, you position yourself to receive a never-ending flow inspiration. *Are you waiting for the rain or turning yourself into a lightning rod?*

39. **Editing is for amateurs.** Joyce Carol Oates once wrote that editing a book was like having multiple abortions. Jack Kerouac once wrote that editing was a betrayal of your own thoughts. And Henry Miller once wrote that editing lead to overcooked language. All three are correct. Editing is the enemy of expression. It forecloses on your creativity's full expression. And it leaves your artistic spirit timid and impotent. Don't save your opinion for later. Risk at every moment all that you have. And make no restrictions on your testimony. You know the voice you most want to be quiet? Give it a megaphone. Because while sabotage is a safe place to be, the only art that matters is the work coated in blood that reflects people's realities right back to them. Make your art raw, bloody and honest. Keep it in the crosshairs of your heart. Otherwise the red pen will own you. *Where are you afraid to express yourself?*

40. **End the self-editing.** As a writer and publisher, I have a personal policy: I don't edit. I don't rewrite. I don't do drafts. I don't go back and revisit old work. I write things once, I write them in blood, and I publish them to the world with zero regret and infinite confidence. Sure, I might change a few words here and there. Or modify my position on an issue as I evolve. And of course, always make grammatical improvements at the request of my editor. But that's proofreading. *Editing means correcting the core of something.* And the moment you allow that to happen – to the work or to the person who authors it – is the moment you betray yourself. That's the problem with self-editing: It renders your creativity timid and impotent. And it's not fair to your core to let that happen. That's what I learned one day one of starting my career right out of college: Living a life without editing yourself isn't just about writing. It's about walking your truth. It's about breathing your brand. It's about staying loyal to yourself. *What self-imposed boulder is in the way of giving your river a voice and letting it flow?*

41. **Engage the muscle of yes.** In a recent interview on *Fresh Air*, The Black Keys explained how their success as a band was largely a function of companies using their music in commercials. “Radio stations weren’t spinning our records, and that’s why saying yes to the advertising opportunity was bigger than anything we’d ever done,” said drummer Patrick Kearney. “But, we never feel that we were selling out. Just saying yes an opportunity to reach a wider audience.” Lesson learned: Artistic abundance is a function of receptivity. And it hinges on your willingness to engage the muscle of yes. That’s the distinction: Amateurs get locked into limited concepts of who they are; but pros stay engaged with life’s possibilities. That way, when a new artistic opportunity comes along, instead of shutting it down because it’s new, they think to themselves, “Oh boy! Another chance to do more of the things I love!” and then aggressively bite into it. Even if it’s not perfect the first few times around. Because the reality is: Not everything you make will feel like a masterpiece. And it doesn’t have to be. Artists who make history forget about getting things right and focus on getting things moving in the right direction. They know that what matters is not the piece itself – but its contribution to their larger body of work. *What do you need to start saying yes to?*

42. **Execute the truest representation of what you are.** As easy as it is to covet the genius of someone you admire, you've still got to find your own work. Otherwise you make art that doesn't feel like your own. And that's a surefire way to sentence yourself to mediocrity. In the book *Art & Fear*, David Bayles addresses this issue beautifully: "Whatever they have is something needed to do their work – it wouldn't help you in your work even if you had it. Their magic is theirs. You don't lack it. You don't need it. It has nothing to do with you." The trick is to gradually weed out the parts that aren't yours. Not to edit yourself – but to stay consistent with yourself. Try asking the question, "If I were me, what would I do?" This casual dissociation gives you an object stance on your art and keeps you accountable to your core. After all, nobody knows you better than you. And only person who can tell when you've accidentally taken a detour off the path of artistic truth is you. Remember: You don't need to make art that looks like art – you need to make art that looks like you. *Are you killing yourself performing someone else's magic?*

43. **Feel the need for slow.** When Jimmy Harper created Wikipedia, his vision was simple: *Instant, free access to the sum of all human knowledge.* Which sounds pretty cool for marketing purposes. Unfortunately, *human* beings are not constructed to acquire information as fast as they can get it. That's the problem with constant connectivity: People have bought into the lie that every minor incident is a supertragedy. That every piece of information is a crisis. But it's not – it all just noise. And the moment you allow life to come crashing in at a speed your constitution can't handle, your art will be the first thing to suffer. My suggestion: Slow down. Press the off button. And delete whatever distractions and obligations are clogging up your intuition and chipping away at your capacity for concentration. Otherwise you'll be spend all your time checking your email in traffic when you should be ship the art you were born to create. Remember: Success is a process of elimination. Take up your chisel and start chipping away what doesn't matter. Unencumbered by life's accumulations, you'll create something that does. *Do you have an office or a distraction factory?*

44. **Feeling is the agent of fame.** At a recent panel discussion, filmmaker and podcaster Kevin Smith put it perfectly: “People will value you in this life if you can think or feel something for them they can’t express for themselves. If you can deliver something people can’t find on their own, they will be willing to support you because they identify with you. Feel everything. That’s your superpower. Never deaden your empathy.” That’s the cool part about being an artist: You can always rely on your own feelings as a valuable source of raw material. Next time you encounter a feeling you’re afraid to have, sit with it. Make friends with it. And exploit it in the service of your audience. By expressing the feelings that are yours and yours alone, people will recognize them as their own too. And you will work forever. *What feelings are you famous for having?*

45. Fight the forces that fragment your focus. From digital distractions to shiny object syndrome to excessive planning to attending pointless meetings with amateurs who do nothing but brainstorm art projects they're never, ever going to execute, you can't allow yourself to get sucked into the vortex of the inconsequential. Otherwise, by the time you finally do sit down to create, you'll be rendered powerless to express anything that matters. The solution is to carve out a ritualized creative schedule, and commit to sticking to it every day. Even if you're tired, sick, annoyed, blocked or busy – you still have to show up. That's what it means to play for keeps. As Tchaikovsky said, "Composition is a daily function that I feel compelled to discharge. I compose because I am made for that and cannot do otherwise." What's more, installing a daily artistic regiment has myriad benefits. First, you create a healthy amount of self-pressure. This keeps you accountable to yourself. Second, you establish a good working rhythm with your creativity. This helps you spot entry points for entering into flow. And third, you train your body to respond to your environment. This keeps you in tune with your surroundings, listening for what wants to be written, instead of deciding what to write. Remember: Distraction is a highly addictive drug. Don't fix at the expense of your focus. *Is what you're doing, right now, taking you away from your art?*

46. **Find your artifact.** Records aren't dead. People don't want the song, they want a magical way to remember the music that they can own and treasure forever. That's why digital will always fall just short of art's full potential. People love stuff. Stuff that changes and inspires them. Stuff they can show to their friends that inspires and changes them too. The challenge is creating a unique way to extend the influence of your art with an artifact. As a consultant and facilitator, I create identity collages for my clients. These handmade woodcarvings, or brandtags, memorialize the company's mission into a limited edition art piece. When hung, it becomes an engaging, conversation starting social object that makes people think and blink. Plus there's a typo in each piece as a Persian rug reminder of imperfection. *What souvenir are you providing for the viewers of your art?*

47. **Finished is the new perfect.** Here's a painful realization for any young artist: You're the only one waiting for you to get everything right. In my experience, eighty percent is enough. Maybe seventy. There comes a point where you have to declare it done. And believe that the hay is in the barn. Otherwise you'll trap yourself in the infinite regression of better. It's like I tell my mentoring clients: "You don't need another round of edits. You don't need to consult with your peer review team. Just ship the damn thing. Most people aren't even going to read it anyway. May as well write what you want." And I get it: It's more convenient to be a victim of resistance than to risk executing what matters. It certainly gets you more attention and sympathy. But the biggest gamble an artist can take is not making art. *Period.* My suggestion: Stop ironing out the wrinkles nobody is going to notice. Get your ass off the treadmill of the inconsequential and move on. *By fixated on improvement, are you missing what you already are?*

48. **Finishing is for beginners.** Real art never finishes. And even though your head will make sure your heart never gets that memo, you've got to press on anyway. Even if nobody notices the work you're putting out. I learned this lesson from Robert Henri, who said, "All any man can hope to do is to add his fragment to the whole. No man can be final, but he can record his progress." That's the secret to longevity in the art world: Hunkering down with your work – every single day – and accepting that not everything you make will feel like a masterpiece. Instead, get good at starting. Stay focused on contributing to your ongoing body of work, not just a single song. After all: Good artists are masters of promiscuity – not perfection. Their legacy is the result of volume – not accuracy. And if you can wake to the canvas of a fresh day with such purity of intent, you will win. *Are you closing the book or showing the world that there are still more pages possible?*

49. Fortune favors the bold, but it frequents the consistent.

Considering how hard, how long and how smart you work – I imagine it feels like you should be more successful by now. But you're not. And you keep wondering, "How much longer will I have to pay my dues?" The answer is: *Longer than you'd like*. That's the most frustrating reality of any artistic career path – it takes freaking forever. And sometimes you feel like you're the only one who hears the music. But as my mentor once told me, "Art takes a long time to pay for itself, so you better believe in what you do. Because it may take a long time before it catches on." That's why consistency – that is, showing up, every single day, even if you're not in the mood – is so essential to playing for keeps. The big question is: *How long are you willing work your ass off before the right people notice?*

50. **Give yourself permission to jump.** Deep inside we are holding our breath and crossing our fingers. But eventually, we have to take the plunge. My suggestion: Stop waiting for your artistic life to begin. Stop waiting for the rest of humanity to tell you that your work is okay. Instead of spending a decade wining approval, just start shipping. Here's how: Dip your pen directly into the self. Find your source of effortless functioning. And work from the place that makes your heart soar. That's the only way to fan yourself into flaming action. After all, a real artist works from the part of her being that is a gift – not an acquisition. She paints with the part of herself that is most the permanent. And as a result, she gives people something they didn't know they wanted. She takes them places they didn't expect to go. Remember: You can only let the marketplace call the tune for so long. Eventually, you have to become governed by the law of your own being. *Will you contributing to the coalition of silence or create brilliant stuff that speaks to the market in a way that has never been spoken before?*

51. **Go out into the world in strategic fashion.** During a recent radio interview, actor and comedian Jay Mohr said it best: “Every role I audition for I play completely. There can’t be room for potential. I swing for the museum every time.” Notice he didn’t say “outfield,” “fence” or “upper deck.” Museum. That’s one hell of a strategy. That’s one hell of a positive attitude. Mohr proves that when you respect everything life has to offer, when you present yourself as though you were a gift, it’s hard for people to ignore you. Even if you strike out and fall on your face, at least the crowd heard the wind cry like a bitch when you swung with all your might. *When you take your art to market, what strategy is guiding you?*

52. **Heighten your consciousness.** I've practiced meditation every day of life since I was twenty-two. It keeps me sane, keeps me creative and keeps me connected to the divine. And while I'm no expert on the topic, here's what I've learned: First of all, meditation is cheaper than worry. I'd rather create a mental pause than waste my imagination sweating over something I don't even care about. Secondly, meditation isn't a technique. It's not something you accomplish – it's something you practice. And lastly, the goal of meditation isn't to get more ideas – the goal is to make the container bigger. That way, ideas are more likely to fall. If you're never explored some kind of meditation practice, start today. You will never be the same. Your art will never be the same. *When was the last time you sat quietly and engaged with your higher self?*

53. **Honor the slog.** Playing for keeps takes prodigious acts of courage. For example, sometimes it's hard to get up and go face the world. But that's a good thing. If it wasn't hard, it wouldn't be worth it. If it wasn't hard, there would be nothing to push against. And if it wasn't hard, there would be no way to stop the people who didn't want it badly enough. As Joseph Campbell writes in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, "Some of us have to go through dark and devious ways before we can find the river of peace or the highroad to the soul's destination." The point is: The anxiety of being an artist doesn't go away. It may vary, but it never fully vanishes. And if you want to make out alive, you have to learn to love that tension. Greet it with a welcoming heart, listen to what it has to say and exploit it in the service of something real and true. *How will you keep desire burning?*

54. **Honor thy ache.** Anxiety is a right of passage. It's a sign that you're on the right path. And thankfully, it's an effective form of self-pressure to help you get over – and stay over – yourself. Forget about trying to eradicate feelings of inadequacy. They're not going away. In fact, the more successful you become, the more those feelings will creep in. Truth is, anxiety is a fundamental human posture. And once you change your relationship to it, you can put it to work. Here's how: Instead of convincing yourself that your fears are a futile campaign, greet your worries with a welcoming heart. Accept them a natural part of the life experience. And understand that there is no art without an occasional crisis of doubt. As Arthur Koestler once said, "If a writer loses his doubts, he's finished. He'll just go on writing the same book like an idiot." *What are you converting your anxiety into?*

55. **Interact with flaming intensity.** As an artist, people need to see that you are possessed. They should feel that you are on fire every time they interact with you. And your flame should shoot a ray of beauty into their hearts that inspires their belief in you, your work and your why. Without that exchange, without that infection of emotion, the people who matter most will continue to resent your calling, resist your creativity and restrain your expression. And the weight of that negativity will be the end of you. No, your job is not to make everybody happy – it's to stop time. To give people a brief and precious glimpse of what they really are. If your work can accomplish that task, it will change all who see it. Forever. *What does the recipient of your art receive?*

56. It's not about doing more – it's about doing different. If you're stuck seeing your life from the same angle, not only will your art suffer – your soul will suffer too. And until you explore the possibility of living differently in some way, both will continue to do so. The bad news is: I don't have a collection of simplistic tactics for temporarily boosting creativity like taking a different route to work or wearing mismatched socks. What I'm suggesting is dramatic personal displacement. Bringing yourself to a place that's so uncomfortable, you have no choice but to be creative in every area of your life. After all: You didn't come here to do what has already been done. It's time to accept the risks of committing to a new path and take your chance in the struggle. In the book *Life Change Artists*, Fred Mandell sums it up well: "We overestimate the magnitude of risk we take in changing our lives, and underestimate our personal ability to successfully navigate such a change." Look: There's always another door to open, and there's always an adventure attached to it. You just have to jump. And you have to believe that you'll be fine. *When was the last time you stepped back from the canvas of your life and flipped your routine on its ass?*

57. Juggle multiple threads of work simultaneously. The best thing my mentor taught me was to think modular. To create in chunks. To work on several projects at once. And to shift between them as circumstances dictate. That's why I'm always writing five books at once. Not because I'm unfocused – but because I'm creating thought bridges, subconscious connections and unexpected integrations between seemingly unrelated ideas. Yes, it requires self-control. Yes, it requires belief in your own capabilities to organize and execute. But as I learned from *Realizing the Impossible*, “The best artists have shit on their shoes. They're running around in the middle of everything, they can't settle down, they can't shit up and they can't quit fidgeting with everything.” Cartoonist Hugh Macleod calls this way of life *crofting*. Someone who never does just one thing. Lots of balls in the air. Lots of different directions. Never waking up and doing the exact same thing each day. Not always the highest paying, but fun and rewarding as hell. *How many plates are you willing to spin?*

58. **Labor heroically.** Anybody can be successful for a short period of time before the rest of the world finds out. Sustainability, on the other hand, is a different animal. It requires patience, stamina, persistence and labor. That's how you build something real: By fully engaging of all your faculties. By enlisting everything you've got. And by committing to an ongoing investment of energy. There's a subject art schools don't teach: *Commitment*. Probably because it's not something that can be comfortably quantified. But it still has to be part of the equation. Because the moment you stop making art, part of you dies. My suggestion: Never stop sending work out into the world. Instead of fabricating fantastic strategies to avoid making art, make a commitment to laying a certain amount of track, every single day. Because while you can pretend to be an artist, you can't pretend to make art. *What kind of structure can you place around yourself to make sure you remember to execute consistently?*

59. **Learn to pull teeth.** Inspiration is great – when it shows up. But most of the time, it needs to be yanked out of hiding. You have to create it. You have to channel it. You have to command it. *Every. Single. Day.* And that's the complaint: Creativity can be like pulling teeth. But there's no point in making mountain out of a molar. If something is like pulling teeth, maybe it's time to get a new pair of pliers. Here are a few from my toolbox: First, honor the wave. When inspiration strikes, go with it. Write until the vein is out. Because it might not fill up again for a while. Second, inspiration is the fruit of sustained effort. Build structure into your creative time. Force yourself to be due at the page. Third, book blank time. Regularly go perpendicular to the activity at hand. By physically and mentally displacing yourself, you allow the lungs of inspiration exhale into your life. *Are you standing by for inspiration to arrive or stepping up and taking it?*

60. **Learn to weather ridicule.** The more successful you become, the more torpedoes will be shot at you. *This is a good thing.* Being ridiculed means being noticed. Being ridiculed means being remembered. But while being ridiculed *does* sting – being ignored will flat out kill you. That’s the real enemy. No use losing your shit because some wanker left a nasty comment on your Facebook wall. Look: You’re nobody until somebody hates you. And if everybody loves your art, you’re doing something wrong. I’m reminded of the advice given to me by graphic novelist David Mack, “An idea is not any good unless it’s on the verge of being stupid.” Are you willing to polarize to monetize? Are you willing to make people react to make a difference? Hope so. Because anything worth doing is worth being attacked for. Try this: Instead of allowing your self-worth to hinge on the words of a few haters, consider it an honor to be criticized. Release your bottomless need for approval. And stop organizing your life around the people who don’t get the joke. Remember: Better to be hated for what you are than loved for what you aren’t. *Whom have you pissed off this week?*

61. **Let yourself get lost.** Serendipity is the breeding ground for novelty. Unfortunately, technology is like a digital bulldozer. Here's why: Because we've become accustomed to instant informational gratification, it's getting harder and harder to joyfully let your curious mind go wherever it needs to go. Nothing against search engines, but finding exactly what you were looking for – the instant you start looking for it – eliminates many of the wonderful accidents that could have sent your brain into unexpected territory. And you focus on trying to undo your mistake instead of developing it into something great. *Yikes.* That's why it's helpful to go analog for *some* portion of your creative process. Even if you would rather stab yourself with the pen than actually write with it, you can't beat ink. Personally, I still keep handwritten journals. And I write in them every day. What's more, I still read books made out of paper. I dig they way they feel, love the way they smell and enjoy stumbling into verbal accidents while flipping through the pages. The point is: The slip of the pen is the spark of the mind. And sometimes we have to lose our direction to find our way. *Are you listening to your unintentional music?*

62. Maintain artistic perspective. A few sobering thoughts about three famous artists. First, Leo Tolstoy. He had thirteen kids when he wrote *War & Peace*. What's your excuse for not creating? Second, Bill Gates. He started Microsoft in a recession. Are you still waiting for the economy to get better? Third, Rodney Dangerfield. He was an aluminum siding installer. What do you need to quit so you can focus on your art? History is saturated with stories just like these. And if you want to keep things in perspective – especially during the low times – it's helpful to remind yourself that you're not alone. That you're not the only one who's terrified. And that you're not the only artist who feels like your entire goddamn career is a hopeless journey. Use the past to keep the future alive. *Do you really think you're the first person who thought about quitting?*

63. Make your life larger than your art. Art is subordinate to life – not the other way around. If you have no interests outside of your work, the world will yawn when they see it. My suggestion: Get the hell out of the studio. It's essential for supporting, enriching, inspiring and informing your work. What's more, physical displacement alters your routines and patterns, stimulates creativity and feeds your social spirit – even if it's just for five minutes. Without making this conscious effort, however, you won't be able to bring anything to the table besides shoptalk. And nothing annoys people more than a one-dimensional artist who maintains such a limited worldview and openness for activities and experiences outside of their scope of interest, that it mars their credibility. *Do you invest as much time in your life as in your art?*

64. **Market your motivations.** In a recent blog post, Seth Godin wrote, “Art is what we call the thing an artist does. It’s not the medium or the oil or the price or whether it hangs on a wall. What matters, what makes it art, is that the person who made it overcame the resistance, ignored the voice of doubt and made something worth making. Something risky. Something human. Art is not in the eye of the beholder – it’s in the soul of the artist.” That’s the lesson: Your customers – that is, your viewers, readers, patrons, fans and listeners – are buying more than just your product. They’re also buying your philosophy, your process; along with the meaning people create for themselves in response to your story. It all depends on what statement about humanity your work makes. *Are you an icon people can bow down to, or an idea people can latch onto?*

65. **Mash life into art.** Don't tell me there's nothing new under the sun – it's 864,938 miles in diameter. *If you can't say something new, you're not trying very hard.* Here's the reality: If you can build a unique enough inspiration pool that nobody can replicate, your work will be unrivaled. If you can ask yourself a unique enough question, nobody else's answer will be able to compare. Fortunately, the world around you is just waiting to be sampled. You simply have to live life with your eyes open and comment penetratingly on what you observe. As Stravinsky once wrote, "I stumble upon something unexpected. It strikes me. I made note of it. And at the proper time, I put it to profitable use." Remember: Creativity is the highest form of active listening. If you're not inspired, you might want to have your hearing checked. *How could you live your life in a way that your art naturally gets done over and over?*

66. Opportunity enters through the door of yes. You are more multiple than you think. *No labels, no limits*, as I like to say. The problem is: You're defining yourself too narrowly. You're trying to tell yourself what you should be, instead of learning who you. If you want to get past the limited definition of yourself, widen out the boundaries of your being. Try small nibbles of your new identity. And be prepared to let go of what you've always been. That way you can evolve into what you were meant to be. For example: What creative energy is seeking a new vehicle for expression? Where could you give your voice another outlet? Maybe there's an entirely new artistic medium just waiting to be activated. You have to say yes. You have to attend to your life wherever it moves. And you have to be willing to listen to what wants to be written. Otherwise new and valid paths for work that matters will remain undiscovered. Remember: This is not all that you are. And the only way to know how much you want something is to try it. *What would you allow in your life if you knew that every experience was part of your divine path?*

67. Paint with the brush of persistence. I didn't invent the nametag. But I certainly took it farther than anyone expected it could go. And now that word is mine. I own it. Forever. And the people who meet me will never think about it the same way again. That's an example of what steady work can finally produce. And the cool part is, you don't have to be the best – you just have to refuse to go away. The problem is, the odds are stacked against you. Because of our instant gratification culture, we're impatient. And because of our abundance of choices, we're quick to quit and pursue something better. But at the heart of all creative badassery is stick-to-itiveness. If you can get good at not going away, the weak will weed themselves out. And only you and your art will remain. *Are you quitting because it's hard or because it's right?*

68. Paint yourself into a committed corner. When I started my career as an artist, I never had a plan. But I never had a backup plan, either. And looking back, I realize how powerful that notion was. After all, backup plans are nothing but sabotage waiting to happen. It's like quitting in advance. As Tom Peters once told me, "The best, if scariest, path to commitment is purposefully going public and cutting off escape routes." That's the essence of playing for keeps: Answering your whispered call. Deliberately putting yourself in a position where there's no turning back. Taking a risk. Then watching what the universe does. Without that level of commitment, you'll never hold yourself accountable. You'll never go all in. And resistance will happily stand by to help you throw in the towel. *Are you jumping off the edge or sliding down the side of the mountain on your butt?*

69. Piracy is a compliment in disguise. My friend Colleen creates feather jewelry. Her work is stunning, playful and elegant. Recently, she came across another artist who blatantly ripped off her website copy, word for word. But although she felt distraught, I told her not to worry. First of all, it happens all the time. In every genre. And there's nothing you can do to prevent it. Secondly, it's a testament to her artistry. Personally, I want to be stolen from. Plagiarism is the highest form of flattery. Lastly, I told her to reach out in a respectful, thankful and professional manner. And to explain that there was no reason to take legal action, nor was there any reason to tell everyone in the entire industry about this person's dishonesty. At least, not yet. This has happened to me a number of times over the years, and more often than not, people are willing to comply. And if they're not, you can always call a hit man. *Are you worth stealing from?*

70. **Plunge immediately into action.** The word “start” comes from the Old English term, *stiertan*, which means, “a sudden movement.” Doesn’t say anything about being perfect. Or big. Or good. *Just sudden.* And understandably, starting can be hard. Especially when you’re paralyzed by the prospect of the artistic task in front of you. The smartest response to this challenge is to lower the threat level of execution. Here’s how: Instead of overwhelming yourself with fears of how daunting your project is, give yourself permission to begin small. Learn to love the drudgery of small simple tasks that push you in the right direction. You’ll discover that executing small steps builds your artistic confidence – plus – gives you the freedom to pause, test, reevaluate and adjust along the way. As Julia Cameron says in *The Artist’s Way*, “Books are written by nibbling away one sentence at a time.” That’s what successful artists know: All that counts is that you make progress in your work. You don’t need to take the tour – you need to buy a guest pass and go. Don’t take slow for an answer. There is a clock inside of you saying now. *How will you convert inertia into demonstrable forward action?*

71. **Practice creative promiscuity.** In the art world, volume is the only vehicle that matters. Prodigiousness is the only path that counts. That's been my strategy since day one: *Out execute the competition.* Because even though I wasn't the best, even though I wasn't the smartest and even though I wasn't the most experienced, I still deployed more work than anybody. And by virtue of volume, my brand automatically elevated. That's the advantage of contributing to an ongoing body of work: *It doesn't just create credibility, it enables access.* It provides multiple entry points for your audience. And that's when people in China start talking about your work. Unfortunately, most young artists trap themselves on the treadmill of better. They let perfection become the gateway drug to procrastination. If only they thought like Stravinsky. He said, "I would go on eternally revising my music were I not too busy composing more of it." That's how he constituted a respectable artistic output, even at a young age: By hunkering down, shipping imperfect work and moving onto the next piece. Be honest with yourself: Do you really need another round of edits on a book nobody's going to read anyway? Just get it done. Get it to where you can smell it. Otherwise it's not real. Remember: The infinite regression of better is the enemy of done. *What are you waiting for?*

72. **Preserve your freedom.** As an artist, I don't ask for much. I just want to stay free enough to write what I want to read – not what the market wants to buy. I want to define my own private creative domain. And if that means I need to walk away from certain projects, clients and opportunities, fine. If that means I have to say no for the sake of my own autonomy and creativity sovereignty, fine. That's the covenant I made with myself, and I will preserve my artistic freedom at all cost. Here's why: I think when you create to infect people with your art instead of trying to create from what the market wants – you win. The aforementioned Hugh McLeod made a powerful point about this in *Ignore Everybody*: “The sovereignty you have over your work will inspire far more people than the actual content ever will.” Your challenge is to approach life as a creation, not a reaction. To stay focused on creating art, not being an artist. That's how you stay the course – *your* course. Otherwise you destroy yourself in response to an invitation from others to stop living. *Where are you holding back from expressing yourself?*

73. **Prolong the encounter.** The best part about making art is, people don't have to get your work right away. In fact, a delayed response is better than an immediate reaction. Think about it: Wouldn't you rather have someone pouring over your work for ten minutes than glancing at it for ten seconds? I know I would. In fact, that was the motivation behind my latest project, The Brandtag Identity Collage. My goal was to mash together design, marketing, writing and leadership into a public piece that made people blink. A work of art so striking that it forced people to stop, squint, cross their arms, start pondering, and invite their friends to join in the fun. As I learned from Hugh McLeod, "It's not just a work of art, it's a social object." That's how you burn the moment into people's brains: By delivering art that's familiar enough to be understood, but unusual enough to be engaging. Focus on that, and your work will go beyond surface value. It will reward people from any angle. And the more they look at it, the more it will repay them. *When people pay attention to you, are you keeping the change?*

74. Push the boundaries of your medium. Derek Sivers changed the record industry forever by breaking rules and ignoring the voices of dissent. As he wrote in *Anything You Want*, “You can’t live on somebody else’s expectations. You don’t have to please anybody but your customers and yourself.” That’s what playing for keeps means: Maintaining a healthy respect for your own visions and opinions. That way, when people try to bash your opinion out of you, you can stick your fingers in your ears. Besides, you can’t argue with a ringing register. If the customers who like your work buy it, all the criticism in the world doesn’t matter. *If you were taken away would people find a replacement or howl in protest?*

75. **Push yourself until you're overextended.** If you think you're overextending yourself, you're probably just a poor judge of distance. Turns out, you can handle a lot more than you thought. Especially you're doing the work of your heart. The secret is to sense when you're being offered the chance to do more. To practice saying yes to more than you can do. That way, the fear of failure keeps the art flowing. And that way, working with a full plate forces you to manage your time more efficiently. Yes, it's exhausting, but it's the most beautiful form of exhaustion available. Certainly beats being bored. As long as you're overextending yourself with the work that matters, I say bend away. Besides, if it's your highest priority, you never really sacrifice for it. *What are you tired of saying no to?*

76. **Quality can't be your sole signature.** My first book wasn't really a book. It contained no promise; offer no benefit and provided no take home value. *It was just an idea. A story.* But, it was a damn good one. And that's exactly how it transformed from a book into a brand. That's the lesson: If you want to take your audience's devotion to the next level, people need to buy the story you're telling. After all, they respond to what you believe – not just what you create. As Hugh MacLeod explained in *Evil Plans*, “Your product has to fit into other people's narrative. It has to fill the gaps in their life. Telling your story has to become a survival tool for other people. Because it's your soul and the purpose and beliefs your soul embodies that people buy into.” That's what most young artists overlook: The fact that people are buying your person, your process and your philosophy as much as your final product. If you want to play for keeps, never lose the destination for your work. Art is only as good as the why that fuels it. *How are you marketing the motivation behind your work?*

77. **Quantity eventually produces quality.** I write between four and seven hours a day. Not just because writing is my religion, and not just because I have a love affair with my art, but because value is a function of volume. My experience has taught me that if you want your voice to matter, if you want people to follow your thinking and if you want to make a name for yourself, volume is the vehicle for being heard. It's more important than accuracy, knowledge, winning, talent, popularity and influence. And simply by playing the numbers in a prolific way, quality eventually shows up. It has to. Because the best way to have a great idea is to have a lot of ideas. Even if most of those ideas suck. Sometimes you have to slog through a sea of shit just to find the one diamond. *If you tripled your creative output, how much better would your body of work become?*

78. **Remain a vivid presence.** Toward the end of his career, the general public no longer gave Stravinsky's music the enthusiastic reception of his early days. And even though he experienced frequent bouts with depression, he still said something that has always stuck with me: "The attitude of the public never made me deviate from my path." Therein lies attitude of someone who plays for keeps: He's willing to suffer quietly. He's willing to persist when nobody shows sympathy or understanding for what he's doing. And he's willing to stand up in the face of hostile indifference and remind people that he's not going away. Along your artistic path, maintaining your presence will depend on how you respond this resistance. It will depend on what happens when you hear that inner voice of hesitation telling you throw in the towel. *What would happen if you abandoned yourself during trying times?*

79. **Remove the threat of rejection.** Writers love to pontificate about how many editors, publishers and agents rejected them before they made it big. Personally, I never chose to participate in that literary pissing contest. I've always practiced Miyagi's Law, which states that the best way to block a punch is to not be there. For example: Want to know how many publishers rejected my book? *None*. Because I did it myself. Want to know how many agents turned my proposals down? *None*. Because I never submitted any. Want to know how many editors told me my work wasn't good enough? *None*. Because, as you already learned, I don't edit myself – not on the page or in person. And it's not about being afraid of rejection – it's about putting yourself in a position yourself where rejection can't even find you. Why torture yourself listening to voices that don't matter when you could be executing work that does? Seems to me, the best way to bring home the bacon is to raise your own pigs. That way, when you're hungry, all you have to do is walk outside. Sure beats waiting in vain only to be rejected by someone who doesn't matter. *What would it take for you to position yourself as the sole shot caller of your work?*

80. **Robust emotional commitment.** I once read an interview with a famous painter who had become paralyzed from the neck down. *Not exactly good for business.* The cool part was, the injury didn't stop him from doing his art. Unable to move his arms during the recovery process, he literally spit paint onto the canvas. And his fans stayed with him for years to come – even while he painted from a wheelchair. If that's not commitment, I don't know what is. *Are you that dedicated to your work? Does your throbbing sense of commitment invite onlookers?* I hope so. Because consistency is the ultimate commitment device. Take it from a guy who's been wearing a nametag twenty-four seven for over a decade – this stuff works. The secret is: Absolute, unquestionable and unthwartable commitment means demonstrating to the people who matter most – every day – that you are not going away. Which means commitment isn't just an obligation – it's a demonstration. It's constant exertion of your values, a consistent extension of your truth and a consummate expression of your core. *How will you show the world that you're serious about your art?*

81. **Screw the masses.** You can certainly buy tickets for the starving artist lottery, but it might be smarter – and cheaper – to go out and find the market for what you love. Or better yet, create it yourself. Even if it's a small one. Cartoonist and writer Hugh McLeod calls this your *micro-audience*. This is the tiny handful of people who are likely to buy your high-end product. “In the old, pre-internet days, if you were a cartoonist like me and wanted to be successful, you pretty much had to be famous. And those gigs were hard to come by. You needed a big time publication syndicate or media company to back you. And of course, all this required a very large audience. Thank God the Internet came along and changed everything.” The hard part is divorcing your ego from the illusion that market size matters. It doesn't. I know a guy who once wrote a book for five people. *Five people*. Naturally, those five people were big executives at big companies who later retained his consulting services for big money. Sounds like size didn't matter after all. The question is: Are you willing to change the game, change the rules, or create your own game where there are no rules? I hope so. Because waiting around for an audience is surefire path to artistic failure. Figure out which of the mainstream hoops are not worth jumping through, and then forge ahead without stopping. *Why be a needle in a stack of needles when you could be the only needle in box?*

82. **Start stupid and broke.** If I knew what I know now, I never would have started. From writing to publishing to running my own business, I always remind myself: “Thank god I was clueless.” That’s the cool part about not knowing: Ignorance isn’t just bliss – it boldness. *What about you? How stupid are you willing to be?* Because the reality is: Intelligence is the great impediment. The less you know, the less you fear. Also, lack of capital is equally advantageous. Especially in the beginning of your career, too much money replaces creativity, stamps out dreaming and eliminates the need for vision. It’s like the rookie golfer who drops a grand at the pro shop before hitting the lynx in an attempt to buy a lower score. Doesn’t work that way. Branding doesn’t take money – it takes imagination. And even if a brand doesn’t take millions to create, that doesn’t mean that it can’t create millions. The point is: Virtues like wisdom and wealth don’t always serve you in the beginning. Be careful not to back away from perceived negatives. It might be the best thing you have going for you. *How does knowing nothing and having nothing work to your advantage?*

83. **Stay loyal to your imperfection.** During a recent workshop with a group of writers, one of my audience members posed the following challenge, “My biggest fear is putting something down that will be viewed as wrong or stupid.” To which I replied, “What’s wrong with being wrong? What’s so bad about being stupid?” That’s what real artists know: It’s smarter to pump out piles of work and learn from your mistakes instead of theorizing about perfection. Besides: Perfectionism enables procrastination, blocks inventiveness and slaughters playfulness. As long as you do postmortems on everything that fails, you’ll keep growing. The cool part is: The seed for your next artwork lies embedded in the imperfections of your current piece. And the only way to water that seed is to believe with all your artistic heart that you don’t have to do everything right. Remember: Anything worth doing is worth screwing up initially. But if you’re not willing to be wrong and stupid first, you’ll never invite the opportunity to be right and brilliant second. *Is your need for perfection inviting compositional paralysis?*

84. **Stick yourself out there.** Alan Fletcher famously said, “I don’t know where I’m going, but I’m on my way.” That’s the attitude every young artist needs to embrace, he says. The courage to close your eyes and jump into the dark, aware that you may land on your face and have to get up smiling. Look: You can only hide your identity behind a mantle of anonymity for so long. Eventually, you have to bare it. You have to subject yourself to the scrutiny of the cold light of day. Even if people call you names that would make your mother cry. And I understand that your art is an expression of the person you are. And it causes existential pain to have your work kicked to the curb. But in the midst of all the surrounding heartache, you can’t ever lose sight of your own artistic responsibility: *To stay loyal to the highest version of yourself.* Because the cool part is, the more you share, the more they care. The more they care, the more they buy. And as long as you keep your heart open, love will always find its way in. *When you stand on the edge of the abyss and realize you can fly, will you jump?*

85. **Talent is overrated.** As an artist, you have two options: You can *squander* energy worrying about how much talent you have, or, you can *spend* energy splattering the canvas with your heart. *Choose wisely.* Because the reality is, history proves time and time again that achievements trump qualifications every day of the week. Think about it: If you never produce anything, nobody will even care if you're talented. If you never produce anything, nobody will ever get a chance to see how talented your work is. And if you never produce anything, nobody will ever react to your work in a way that helps you make it better. What matters is execution. What matters is that you ship. What matters is that you sing with a human voice. If you want to play for keeps, stop operating out of the toxic idea that you need to know what you're doing. *You don't.* You just need to do it. Hell, I've been doing this for ten years and I still don't know what I'm doing. *But I sure do a lot of it.* And the people who matter notice. Just remember: Art existed long before degrees did. You don't need another acronym – you need a bigger portfolio. *What have you executed this week?*

86. The greatest gift you can give is your experience. Art is the fundamental expression of who you are. It's the autobiography of your deepest thoughts and unique collection of universal human emotions you bring to the table. As Tolstoy's advised, "Write only with your pen dipped in your own blood." For that reason, my definition of art making has always been: "Slice open a vein and bleed your truth all over the page." That's where your best work is born. The good news is: It has less to do with skill and talent and more do with will and honesty. The bad news is: It's a risk, it hurts and it's going to take all of you. But it's absolutely worth it. If you want to play for keeps, go there. Commit to self-disclosure. Ask penetrating questions with your work. And make some risky art. Remember: The more personal and intimate you are willing to be, the more universal your work become. *Where are you willing to take people with you work?*

87. Throw pottery, not punches. As we all learned from *The Little Mermaid*, the seaweed is always greener in somebody else's lake. Next time you hear about another artist who's more successful and more famous than you, try not to get too pissed off. As my grandfather reminds me, "The meanest feeling of which any human being is capable is feeling bad at another's success." Instead of making justifications about why other people don't deserve success as much as you, use their accomplishments as glowing sources of inspiration. Build off their energy. Convert it to fuel. After all, they must be doing something right. Turn toward their triumphs with a hospitable heart and distribute your motive force accordingly. *What excuses do you make for other people's accomplishments?*

88. **You are what you charge.** Harlan Ellison has written over one thousand short stories, novellas, screenplays, teleplays and essays. In a recent television interview, he shared the following insight: “The only value for me is if you put money in my hand. You better cross my palm with silver, because I’m supposed to be paid every time I do something. Sure, I’ll sell my soul, but only at the highest rate. Because I don’t take a piss without getting paid.” When it comes to pricing, share it publicly. Set a precedent of value. When it comes to charging, state your fee confidently – then shut up. He, who talks next, loses. And when it comes to collecting, never feel guilty about asking for your money. If you delivered the work, you deserve the cheese. *Who are you still afraid to send an invoice to?*

89. **You can't outsource originality.** The purpose of art is to give your values a heartbeat. To go where the soul shines forth and deliver the death stroke with everything you've got. That's what makes your work matter. That's what makes your audience gasp. On the other hand, if your work is nothing but a cheap echo of someone else's art, eventually people are going to catch on. Because anybody can be successful for a short period of time before the rest of the world finds out. If you truly want to play for keeps, never paint with another man's palette. Learn to recognize and respect your own value. Embrace novelty with shattering enthusiasm. And believe that more of what you are will come to you. *If you were charged with the crime of originality, would there be enough evidence to convict you?*

90. You can't set art off in a corner. Performance isn't a nicety – it's a necessity. You have to be willing stand up and be recognized for your work. Otherwise your art will be ignored. In a recent interview on public radio, songwriter Sheryl Crow made an interesting point on this topic: "Nobody buys records anymore. That's why touring is so essential. The best way to afford being an artist is, always has been, and always will be, to go out and play for people." When was your last show? When is your next show? Because if you're not regularly getting up in front of people and giving the gift of your art, what's the point of doing it? Without a collision between your work and the outside world, you're just winking in the dark. Your art is the tree in the forest that nobody heard. The upside of exposure is everything. *Are you safe and invisible or risky and everywhere?*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott Ginsberg is an author, speaker, consultant, mentor, publisher, award-winning blogger & one smoking hot piece of brain candy. He also wears a nametag 24-7. Even to bed.