



## The Accidental Creative

### How to Be Brilliant at a Moment's Notice

#### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

You go to work each day tasked with (1) inventing brilliant solutions that (2) meet specific objectives by (3) defined deadlines. If you do this successfully you get to keep your job. If you don't, you get to work on your résumé. The moment you exchange your creative efforts for money, you enter a world where you will have to be brilliant at a moment's notice. (No pressure, right?)

Many of us assume that our creative process is beyond our ability to influence, and pay attention to it only when it isn't working properly. For the most part, we go about our daily tasks and everything just "works." Until it doesn't. We treat our creative process like a household appliance. It's just expected to work quietly in the background, and we lose sight of how much we depend on it until the day we're stuck with dirty socks.

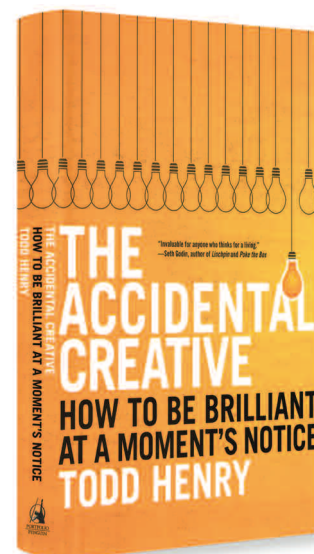
Adding to this lack of understanding is the rapidly accelerating pace of work. Each day, we are faced with escalating expectations and a continual squeeze to do more with less. We are asked to produce ever-increasing amounts of brilliance in ever-shrinking amounts of time. There is an unspoken (or spoken!) expectation that we'll be accessible 24/7 and, as a result, we frequently feel like we're "always on."

Now business creativity expert Todd Henry explains how to unleash your creative potential. Whether you're a creative by trade or an "accidental creative," this book will help you quickly and effectively integrate new ideas into your daily life.

*The Accidental Creative* offers a practical method for discovering your personal creative rhythm, whether you're a manager or a consultant, a designer or a performer.

#### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to begin with your end goal in mind.
- How to build stimulating relationships.
- How to manage creativity as your most valuable resource.
- How to structure the right inputs to maximize creative output.
- How to focus on effectiveness, not efficiency.



by Todd Henry

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: THE ACCIDENTAL CREATIVE

by Todd Henry

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## Introduction

In some circles, the word “creative” has recently morphed from adjective to noun. If you are one of the millions among us who make a living with your mind, you could be tagged a “creative.” Every day, you solve problems, innovate, develop systems, design things, write, think and strategize. You are responsible for moving big conceptual rocks, crafting systems that form the foundations for future growth, and creating value that didn’t exist before you arrived on the scene.

You may prefer the term “strategist” or “manager,” or something else that feels more *concrete*. Call yourself anything you want, but if you’re responsible for solving problems, developing strategies or otherwise straining your brain for new ideas, I’m going to call you a creative — even if you ended up being one accidentally.

There are tremendous benefits to doing creative work. You get to add unique value, carve out your own niche in the marketplace and watch your notions and hunches go from conception to execution; could there be any type of work more gratifying? But the flip side of this is that whether you are a designer, manager, writer, consultant or programmer, you are required to create value each and every day without reprieve. The work never ends, and as long as there is “just one more thing” to think about, finding time to rest can be difficult. Your primary tool — your mind — goes with you everywhere. If your job is to create then you are always looking for new ideas. In addition, you won’t always have the option of going back to your desk to quietly brainstorm, vetting your ideas one by one. As a creative, you will regularly find yourself in situations that require you to generate brilliant ideas at a moment’s notice.

This is no easy feat. If you want to deliver the right idea at the right moment, you must begin the process far upstream from when you need that idea. You need to build practices into your life that will help you focus your creative energy. These practices will help you stay engaged and productive over the long term without experiencing the rampant burnout that often plagues creative workers.

In other words, purposeful preparation and training using the tools in this book will directly increase your capacity to do brilliant work, day after day, year after year. ●

## PART I: THE DYNAMICS

### The Dynamics of Creative Work

No matter whether you are leading a team, developing marketing strategies, running a small business or writing copy, when you are compensated for creating value with your mind, the pressure to perform is palpable.

The always-on manner with which many creatives approach their work is arrhythmic, but the creative process is naturally rhythmic. There are peaks and troughs of productivity, an ebb and flow to idea generation. Working harder and staring more intently at the problem to achieve better ideas is like trying to control the weather by staring at the clouds. Rather, you need to incorporate practices that instill a sense of structure, rhythm and purpose into your life. You need to create space for your creative process to thrive rather than expect it to operate in the cracks of your frenetic schedule. This will not only help you generate better ideas now, but it will also ensure



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## Five Areas of Creative Rhythm

- **Focus.** In order to create effectively, you need a clear and concrete understanding of your objectives.
- **Relationships.** One of the most powerful sources of creative inspiration and rejuvenation is other people.
- **Energy.** To make the most of your day, you need to establish practices around energy management.
- **Stimuli.** The quality of the output of any process is dependent on the quality of its inputs, and this holds true of the creative process.
- **Hours.** Time is the currency of productivity, and how you handle it will ultimately determine your success or failure.

that you are acting on the things that matter most instead of drifting through your days.

To *thrive* in the create-on-demand world will require you to make some real changes to the way you structure your life, and the way you think about what you do. Your best creative work will follow.

### Creative Rhythm

To unleash your creative potential now and thrive over the long term, you need to establish your own rhythm — one that is independent of the pressures and expectations you face each day. This Creative Rhythm will provide you with the stability and clarity to engage your problems head-on. This rhythm is set by how you structure five elements: focus, relationships, energy, stimuli and hours.

Practices in each of these five areas (*see sidebar*) provide the foundation for a life that is prolific, brilliant and healthy. ●

## The Dynamics of Team Work

Creative teams face two conflicting pressures: to produce timely and consistent work, and to produce unique and brilliant work. The pull between these two expectations creates a tension like that from two people pulling on a rope. When this pull — between possibilities and pragmatics — becomes too strong, the rope is taut, eliminating the peaks and troughs of productivity required to do our best creative work.

We are constantly forced to choose between striving to improve the quality of our work and driving it to completion. This dynamic manifests itself in three ways:

- **The Time-Versus-Value Tension.** The pressure to keep the momentum going on our projects can feel a bit like pushing a rock up a very steep hill. We might stop to sit and catch our breath, but we still have to exert a small amount of effort at all times to keep the rock from rolling back down the hill.

Being aware of how mental overexertion is affecting us is often difficult, until we suddenly realize that we're not creating at the level we once did or that we're just not as excited about our work as we used to be.

- **The Predictable-Versus-Rhythmic Tension.** The push toward systemized and predictable creativity can sometimes cause creatives to feel like we're expected to perform like machines. As a result, though we resent it, we often begin to behave that way.

The solution to this is to regain a sense of mastery over time and focus.

- **The Product-Versus-Process Tension.** The organization is primarily concerned with the finished product, but 99 percent of what we do as creatives is process. In fact, many creative jobs are fundamentally oriented around perpetuating processes rather than generating products.

The tension between product and process is a natural tension within any kind of organized creative work, so we can't ignore its effects. We can, however, learn to mitigate them by applying principles related to time, focus and relationships. ●

## The Side Effects: Dealing with the Assassins of Creativity

While creative workplaces are very complex and there are many dynamics at play, there are three damaging side effects that serve as broad categories for all the others. I like to call them the “assassins” of the creative process because they are stealthy and they effectively neutralize our creative capacity. They can creep into a work environment almost unseen and begin to undo our capacity to perform at our best. Once you understand these assassins and can spot their effects, you can begin to systematically weed them out.

The three assassins of the creative process are dissonance, fear and expectation escalation.

- **Dissonance.** The most significant dissonance within organizations exists when the “why” of our work isn't lining up with the “what” of our day-to-day activity.

One of the most important responsibilities of creative leaders is to eliminate these little areas of dissonance as often as possible. They need to ensure that the “why”

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and the “what” are lining up for people on their team by consistently reminding team members of the overall strategy and how it aligns with the current day-to-day work.

- **Fear.** For some of us, fear is a natural result of our environment. For the most part, our fears are largely exaggerated; few of us can point to a person who lost his or her job because of a reasonable idea that didn’t pan out. More often than not, we simply don’t want to stand out, whether positively or negatively, because of the fear of being ostracized by our peers or managers.

This kind of fear can be corralled into two categories: fear of failure and, even worse, fear of success.

Growth is uncomfortable, but without the discomfort our capacity doesn’t remain the same, it shrinks. If we’re not growing, we’re dying.

- **Expectation Escalation.** The final assassin of creativity is expectation escalation. We allow comparisons to affect our current creative engagement. The moment we place concrete expectations on the end results of a project — this upgrade is going to double last year’s sales figures! — we begin closing off potential executions and helpful thoughts because we deem them “not useful enough” in accomplishing our escalated expectations. Doing this too early in the creative process can seriously derail brilliant ideas and prevent them from ever seeing the light of day. ●

### PART 2: CREATIVE RHYTHM

## Focus: Zeroing in on What’s Critical

If you want to thrive in the create-on-demand world, you must develop the capacity to focus deeply. Though broad and shallow engagement may feel necessary because of the number of priorities on your plate, to be truly effective you must cultivate the ability to do quick, focused dives into the depths of a project and emerge with useful ideas. More important, this must be done in spite of the increasing pressure to do things faster, better and cheaper.

The only solution is to stop living reactively and to instill a new practice of thinking deeply about your work: Lock in on the heart of the problem quickly (define), establish your game plan to center your activities around the most crucial priorities (refine), and organize your work so that you’re minimizing distractions and staying on course (cluster). Developing these practices will increase the number and quality of spontaneous insights you experience.

## Define: Using Challenges to Lock in on the Problem

In any project, there is the main problem we’re trying to solve, but there are also many subproblems. One effective way to gain traction quickly is by positioning project objectives in the form of questions designed to surround the problem. We call this establishing “Challenges.”

One of a leader’s most critical roles is to identify the Challenges for each project. Setting out four to six Challenge questions for each project will help the team surround the problem and ensure that all critical aspects are given adequate attention. The more quickly you can focus your mind on what you’re *really* trying to do, the faster you gain creative traction.

## Refine: The Big 3

On my office whiteboard you will see “The Big 3” followed by a short list of my current creative priorities. The Big 3 refers to the three things I need to gain creative traction on right now. They aren’t necessarily my biggest projects, though they often are. Rather, the Big 3 is best described as the three most important items that I’m still looking for critical insight on.

The Big 3 is a constant reminder of where I need to dedicate my creative bandwidth. When I read a book, I’m looking for connections or concepts that are relevant to my Big 3. When I have a conversation, I check it against my Big 3 for possible new insights. When I meet someone new, I stay open to how he or she may be able to help me with my Big 3.

## Cluster: Chunking Similar Tasks

There is a practice in retail management known as “intelligent adjacency.” It means placing complementary items next to each other, like toothbrushes and toothpaste, so that when a customer finds one item, the proximity of the complementary item makes it more likely he or she will buy both.

The practice of clustering is about finding intellectual adjacencies within your work and clustering your efforts to keep you engaged and focused more deeply and for longer periods of time. By doing this you minimize the psychological cost of switching tasks and constantly having to refocus your efforts. ●

## Relationships: Being Brilliant Together

There are three strategies that can help you be more purposeful about your relationships: circles, head-to-

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heads and core teams. Each is designed to help you achieve more interdependence, inspiration and accountability in your work. We are not wired to do life alone; the more we can network ourselves with others, the better.

### Start a Circle

Many of the greatest creatives throughout history have gathered in small groups to stay focused and engaged, and the practice continues to benefit those who go to the effort to instill it. It's something that I've done for years, and it's been an immeasurable source of inspiration and accountability for the work that I'm doing. These small group meetings can stoke your passion, help you stay aligned with what matters most, inspire and give you new ideas or directions for projects, and simply feed you emotionally in ways you may be lacking.

The size of the ideal circle varies. Some people prefer a smaller circle for the increased level of intimacy it provides, while others prefer to have a larger group in order to leverage a greater diversity of thought and experience. While the composition of your circle will vary, you want to invite people whom you believe you will have the ability to connect with in a meaningful way and who also want to do better creative work.

### Head-to-Heads

One way to cultivate the benefits of friendly competition in your creative life is to establish the practice of head-to-heads.

In a head-to-head meeting, two people get together, and each party is responsible for sharing new insights and new resources they've encountered since the last meeting. The discussion can be on any topic — a book you're reading, a seminar you attended, something you made — but the idea is to share something that will be both intriguing and challenging to the other person and that will stimulate discussion. In some ways, the head-to-head provides accountability for you to maintain regular times of study and purposeful experience because

### Relationships Provide Stability

Your relationships provide the stability and clarity you need to do your best work, and they are also the key to staying emotionally engaged. For creatives, slipping into an overly conceptual mode and ignoring your emotional intuitions, or simply becoming emotionally numb to your environment, is a very real danger. Maintaining deep, vibrant relationships is a way to stay emotionally engaged, in tune with your environment and poised.

you know that you will be required to share something you've done since the previous meeting.

### Establish a Core Team

I give quite a bit of latitude to certain people in my life to speak truth to me. Sometimes it stings, but the temporary sting of unwanted truth is much easier to bear than the harsh sting that comes after a prolonged period of living in a world of imagined vulnerability. I would much rather have friends inflict these wounds than cynics, critics or competitors, all of whom want me to fail.

There are three people in my life who have full permission to speak anything they want to me and whom I regularly meet with in order to review my goals and my progress. I consider them my core team, and they are always my first e-mail when something good happens or when I need advice.

Whom can you trust to speak the truth to you, no matter how hard it may be? Whom do you trust to say the things that no one else will say? You must have these people in your life if you want to continue improving your work. ●

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### Energy: Your Invisible Ally

Energy management is critical to staying out of ruts. Like a gambler who falls behind and needs to wager bigger and bigger amounts to get back to even, the creative in the risky habit of ignoring energy puts himself in a seemingly impossible situation. But it's never too late to build healthy practices around energy management. We can start making wise choices now about how and where we spend our energy to ensure that we're not neglecting the important things in our lives for the sake of what's convenient. It's all too easy to waste the energy we need for important creative opportunities on unproductive or unfocused behaviors.

### Whole-Life Planning

When you are planning your life, you need to account for every commitment you make in every area. This means that when you are in a busy season at work, you need to be disciplined enough to trim back the number of personal commitments you make. Similarly, when you are entering a busy season in your personal life, you need to be purposeful about the extra commitments you take on from work. While you can't always choose what you work on, you can be careful and strategic about where you focus your energy outside of those core commitments.

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There are three horizons of whole-life planning that I recommend to clients: weekly, monthly and quarterly. It is critical to get ahead of your energy commitments and examine them objectively. Saying no to a new opportunity is very difficult in the moment, but if you have been strategic in your planning and know what a new commitment will truly cost you, then you can refuse new opportunities with confidence. Once you understand your limits, you will be able to manage your energy more effectively. Remember, this is about setting yourself up to have conceptual breakthroughs in the areas of your life and work that matter most.

### Eliminate Less Effective Activity

A second energy-management practice closely related to whole-life planning is pruning.

In a good vineyard, the vine keeper is constantly pruning, but it's not that the pruned branches are dead or diseased in some way. Rather, the keeper removes young, unproductive branches so that much-needed nutrients can get to the older, fruit-bearing parts of the vine. If the young growth isn't pruned back, the vine will bear less fruit and eventually produce none at all.

The same principle of nature applies to the natural rhythms of your creative process. Every day there are little sprouts of growth that emerge in your life. New opportunities, new projects, new ways to expend your energy. Distractions. Temptations to divert your resources or attention.

Just as the young, fruit-bearing branches on a vine must be pruned back in order to provide needed resources to the critical sections of the whole plant, you must learn to identify the activities in your life that seem to be providing good results in the short run but will eventually decrease your effectiveness in the most critical areas of your life. ●

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## Stimuli: What Goes in Must Come Out

There are three practices that I've found tremendously helpful for myself and my clients in processing and assimilating information in a way that will be useful in the creative process. The practices, which are designed to instill rhythm and purpose into the stimuli we absorb, can be divided into three categories: cultivate, process and experience.

### Cultivate: The Study Plan

Maintaining a study plan will help you cultivate the kinds of stimuli you allow into your life and ensure that

you are putting the most important pieces in place first. I have used one for years, and it has made a tremendous difference in my exposure to great thinkers, my understanding of key issues at work, and my ability to process new and complex thoughts. I consult and revise it regularly — typically in my monthly checkpoints — as a way to make sure that I'm continuing to challenge myself with the things I choose to allow in my head.

The practice of deliberate study plays an important role in the development of your capacity to think and to process new information. When you assemble a study plan, you cultivate a queue of stimuli designed to grow your creative capacity. Your ability to synthesize new ideas is largely influenced by your depth and breadth of knowledge in diverse domains of expertise. As you study, you develop networks of understanding that connect bits of data in your life into meaningful patterns.

### Process: Notation

The goal of study is not simply to absorb a lot of new information. You want to process and assimilate it, then apply it to your life and work. If you don't cultivate insights from what you take in, then the value of stimuli in your life decreases dramatically. Taking good notes on your observations, insights and experiences with a reliable thought-capture system prevents them from disappearing into the ether.

In addition to making good observations and regularly recording them, you should also make a practice of regularly reviewing your notes to see if there are any potentially applicable insights. Many creatives I've worked with take copious notes, but they're practically useless because they're always moving on to the next urgent matter, and thus never bother to review them.

### Purposeful Experience: Exploring Your World

With all this emphasis on study and reflection, you don't want to neglect actual experiences. You absorb much of your understanding of the world through sensory interaction and experiment, and to ignore this would be to cut yourself off from the most significant source of inspiration. You need to regularly seek experiences that will enlighten you, help you see the world in new ways and open you to new ways of thinking.

We must deliberately build new, different and challenging experiences into our lives. This means setting aside time to put ourselves in stimulating and even purposefully uncomfortable situations so that our minds are forced to see the world in new ways. ●

### Hours: They're the Currency of Productivity

Each project you take on makes demands on your time. You are forced to make priority calls about where you're going to spend your hours and, because of the pressure of scarcity, you probably frequently feel like you have one chance to get it right. What we often overlook is that one hour effectively spent can produce better results than five hours spent on a lot of frenetic activity. Breakthroughs can happen in a brief moment, but these kinds of sudden breakthroughs result from a lifestyle of structuring your time according to an effectiveness mindset rather than an efficiency one.

#### Establishing Idea Time

If you want to have a lot of great ideas, you need to structure formal time into your life to generate them.

It's best to spend your hour of Idea Time working on one issue. I encourage clients to begin with their Big 3. Choose one of the items on your list and dedicate one uninterrupted hour focusing on generating ideas.

This may sound almost too obvious, even silly. "Put time on your calendar to generate ideas." It's so simple that it's tempting to dismiss it. But it's the small things that make you effective. It's your attention to details that sets you apart. Knowing does nothing for you — it's doing that matters. If you want to thrive you must dedicate yourself to doing the things that few people are willing to do. You need to go beyond hacks and quick fixes, and instead develop practices. Practices not only develop skills, they increase your capacity. They form the banks that allow the river to run deep.

#### Unnecessary Creating

In *The Artist's Way*, creativity expert Julia Cameron shares a practice she stumbled upon while living in New Mexico and recovering from yet another in a series of career disasters. Every morning, she writes about three pages, longhand, of pure stream of consciousness. In describing her method for "morning pages," Cameron says there is no need for editing or structuring the content. The entire purpose of the exercise is to get the brain moving and to circumvent any potential barriers to creative breakthroughs.

What Cameron is advocating through the practice of morning pages is the act of Unnecessary Creating, creating for ourselves rather than for others. When we spend much of our time in on-demand creating, we can quickly lose touch with the passions that fuel our best work. We grow used to leveraging our abilities for the

sole purpose of meeting others' expectations, and much of it is driven by hitting our marks rather than by exploring new possibilities. The ironic part is that this personal creative passion is the most critical thing we bring to the work we do. Creating on demand often causes us to lose the edge that fuels our best work and sometimes causes us to shrink from risk because of the potential consequences of failure.

When we create unnecessarily, we are setting our own agenda. We have permission to try new things, develop new skills and make things solely for ourselves. The main purpose is to put our ideas into fixed form and to attempt things that we might not get to try in our day job. ●

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### Putting It All Together: The Checkpoints

The Weekly Checkpoint is where many tactical decisions will be made regarding the practices. As your schedule is shaping up for the upcoming week, you'll have a much better sense of how and where the practices will fit most effectively into your life. Whatever works for you is fine, but be consistent.

During your Weekly Checkpoint you will think about how to implement the practices into your upcoming week:

#### Weekly Checkpoint Prompts

##### Focus

- *Challenges*: Look at, or create, a comprehensive list of your projects. Do each of them have associated Challenges? If not, create them.
- *Big 3*: What are your Big 3 for the week? Write Challenges for each of the Big 3.
- *Clustering*: Are there ways you can structure similar work this week so that there is less task switching? Block specific time on your calendar for these activities.

##### Relationships

- *Circles*: Do you have a circle meeting on the calendar? Do you need to prepare for it? If so, put time on your calendar.
- *Head-to-Heads*: Do you have any head-to-heads this week? Do you need to prepare? When will you do it? Put time on your calendar.
- *Core Team*: Do you need to reach out to a member of your core team for advice on something? If so, add it to your task list for the week or fire off a quick e-mail.

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## Energy

- *Whole-Life Planning*: Are there any potential conflicts this week between work and personal activities or expectations? How will you get ahead of them?
- *Pruning*: Is there anything that you'd planned but now realize may not be a good idea, given your upcoming schedule? How can you prune it?

## Stimuli

- *Study*: When will your personal study times be this week? Put them on the calendar. What will they consist of? Take a look at your Stimuli Queue and map your week's stimuli.
- *Notation*: Take just a few minutes to glance at your notes from the previous week as well as the indexes in the front of your notebook.
- *Purposeful Experience*: Do you have one on your calendar this week? When will it happen?

## Hours

- *Idea Time*: When will you structure your Idea Time this week? What will you focus on during these sessions? Put it on the calendar with the associated project name.
- *Unnecessary Creating*: What will you do for Unnecessary Creating this week? Put it on your calendar.

The Monthly Checkpoint is an hour per month, preferably at the very end of a month (to plan for the upcoming one). The goal is to recognize trends in your work and to do some strategic thinking about which types of practices will help you the most in coming weeks.

The Quarterly Checkpoint is the longest horizon planning you will do. Ideally you will be able to take an entire day for this quarterly session, but, understandably, you may not be able to break away from your life in order to do so. If this is the case, the Quarterly Checkpoint can take place an hour at a time in the mornings or evenings over the course of a week. ●

## Cover Bands Don't Change the World

Because we've understood the importance and effectiveness of bringing unique passions to the creative process, we've used the tagline "Cover bands don't change the world" for as long as Accidental Creative has existed. A cover band is a band that plays other people's music. Occasionally you'll hear one of these bands rattle

off something like "Now we're going to play something we wrote," and a collective protest arises from the clubgoers.

Why? Because no one came to hear the band's original music. This is the expectation. It's the "brand promise," if you will. When a cover band pulls an original tune from the repertoire, that promise is violated in a major way.

## Don't Be a Cover Band

There are a lot of "cover bands" in the marketplace today. If their only goal is to make a lot of money, so be it. But the products and people who really change the game seem to be the ones who are able to stay true to a set of principles rather than being driven to quick returns. They develop a loyal audience rather than a fickle one that turns away the moment they play an original.

It's my desire to continue to strive to find my own voice and to try to weed out all the places where I'm being "cover-bandish." This can be very tricky because it often means turning down more work than I accept, but my hope is that the original value that I bring to the clients I chose to work with will create raving fans who want to continue to work with me and trust me when I develop new products or ideas.

How about you? Are you willing to bravely pursue your own voice, carve out your own niche in the marketplace and avoid the temptation to go for quick success? In looking at the long-term arc of your life and creating, are you willing to pour yourself into practices that will help you uncover hidden potential and unlock passions that have been buried beneath layers of expectations and obligations?

There is no greater reward than that of knowing that you are free from the need to be defined by pay or prestige, and are instead motivated by the very process of doing your work each day. This is how we begin to see the seeds of greatness spring up in our lives. ●

### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *The Accidental Creative*, you'll also like:

1. ***Disciplined Dreaming* by Josh Linkner.** This summary shows you how to create profitable new ideas and empower your employees' creativity.
2. ***Enchantment* by Guy Kawasaki.** Renowned entrepreneur, venture capitalist and former Apple evangelist Kawasaki provides insight into how to positively impact change and wow your audience.
3. ***Resonate* by Nancy Duarte.** Learn how to transform any presentation into an engaging journey by leveraging techniques normally reserved for cinema and literature.