

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

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

your creative DNA

In my early years in New York City, I studied with the choreographer Merce Cunningham. Merce had a corner studio on the second floor at 14th Street and Eighth Avenue, with windows on two sides. During breaks in classes, I watched a lot of traffic out of those windows, and I observed that the traffic patterns were just like Merce's dances—both appear random and chaotic, but they're not. It occurred to me that Merce often looked out of those windows, too. I'm sure the street pattern was consoling to him, reinforcing his discordant view of the world. His dances are all about chaos and dysfunction. That's his creative DNA. He's very comfortable with chaos and plays with it in all his work. My hunch is that he came to chaos before he came to that studio, but I can't help wondering if maybe he selected the place because of the chaos outside the windows.

Of course, when I looked out those windows, I didn't see the patterns the way Merce did, and I certainly didn't find solace in their discordance. I didn't "get it" the way he did. I wasn't hard-wired that way. It wasn't part of my creative DNA.

I believe that we all have strands of *creative code* hard-wired into our imaginations. These strands are as solidly imprinted in us as the genetic code that determines our height and eye color, except they govern our creative impulses. They determine the forms we work in, the stories we tell, and how we tell them. I'm not Watson and Crick; I can't prove this. But perhaps you also suspect it when you try to understand why you're a photographer, not a writer, or why you always insert a happy ending into your story, or why all your canvases gather the most interesting material at the edges, not the center. In many ways, that's why art historians and literature professors and critics of all kinds have jobs: to pinpoint the artist's DNA and explain to the rest of us whether the artist is being true to it in his or her work. I call it DNA; you may think of it as your creative hard-wiring or personality.

When I apply a critic's temperament to myself, to see if I'm being true to my DNA, I often think in terms of focal length, like that of a camera lens. All of us find comfort in seeing the world either from a great distance, at arm's length, or in close-up. We don't consciously make that choice. Our DNA does, and we generally don't waver from it. Rare is the painter who is equally adept at miniatures and epic series, or the writer who is at home in both historical sagas and finely observed short stories.

The photographer Ansel Adams, whose black-and-white panoramas of the unspoiled American West became the established notion of how to "see" nature (and, no small feat, helped spawn the environmental movement in the United States), is an example of an artist who was compelled to view the world from a great distance. He found solace in lugging his heavy camera on long treks into the wilderness or to a mountaintop so he could have the widest view of land and sky. Earth and heaven in their most expansive form was how Adams saw the world. It was his signature, an expression of his creative temperament. It was his DNA.

Focal length doesn't only apply to photographers. It applies to any artist.

The choreographer Jerome Robbins, whom I have worked with and admire,

tended to see the world from a middle distance. The sweeping vision was not for him. Robbins's point of view was right there on the stage. Others besides me have noted how often Robbins had his dancers watch someone else dance. Think of his very first ballet, *Fancy Free*. Boys watch girls. Girls then watch boys. And upstage, the bartender watches everything as if he were Robbins's surrogate. His is the point of view from which the ballet's story is told. Robbins is both observing and observed, safely, at a middle distance.

It helps to know that Robbins grew up wanting to be a puppeteer, and I think this way of seeing the world—controlling events from behind the scenes or above, but not so distant that you cannot maintain contact with the action on stage—pervades almost everything he created. I doubt it was something he chose consciously, but in terms of creative DNA, it was a dominant strand in his work. Check out the film of *West Side Story*, which Robbins choreographed and co-directed. The story line is famously adapted from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*—in other words, it's not his own. Yet even with a borrowed plot, you still see Robbins's impulses coming to the fore, imprinting themselves on the drama and the dancing. Nearly every group scene involves performers being observed. Jets watch Sharks, Sharks watch Jets, girls watch boys, boys watch girls. This is not how Shakespeare did it. But it is Robbins's worldview.

Other artists see the world as if it is one inch from their nose. The novelist Raymond Chandler, whose Philip Marlowe books like *Farewell, My Lovely* and *The Long Goodbye* are classics of American hardboiled detective fiction, was obsessed with detail. He works in extreme close-up, a succession of tight shots that practically put us inside the characters' skulls. The plots of his stories are often incomprehensible—he believed that the only way to keep the reader from knowing whodunit was not to know yourself—but his eye for descriptive detail was razor-sharp. Here is the opening of his first full-length novel, *The Big Sleep*:

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid October, with the sun not shining and a look of hard wet rain in the clearness of the foothills. I was

wearing my powder-blue suit, with dark blue shirt, tie and display handkerchief, black brogues, black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them. I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn't care who knew it. It was everything the well-dressed private detective ought to be. I was calling on four million dollars.

Chandler kept lists of observed details from his life and from the people he knew: a necktie file, a shirt file, a list of overheard slang expressions, as well as character names, titles, and one-liners he intended to use sometime in the future. He wrote on half-sheets of paper, just twelve to fifteen lines per page, with a self-imposed quota that each sheet must contain what he called “a little bit of magic.” The “life” in his stories was in the details, whether his hero Marlowe was idling in his office or in the middle of a brutal confrontation. No long-distance musings on the state of the world. No middle-distance group shots. Just a steady stream of details, piling one on top of the other, until a character or scene takes shape and a vivid picture emerges. Up close was Chandler’s focal length. If some people like to wander through an art museum standing back from the paintings, taking in the effect the artist was trying to achieve, while others need a closer look because they’re interested in the details, then Chandler was the kind of museum-goer who pressed his nose up to the canvas to see how the artist applied his strokes. Obviously, all of us look at paintings from each of these vantage points, but we focus best at some specific spot along the spectrum.

I don’t mean to get too caught up in observational focal length. It’s one facet out of many that makes up an artist’s creative identity. Yet once you see it, you begin to notice how it defines all the artists you admire. The sweeping themes of Mahler’s symphonies are the work of a composer with a wide vision. He sees grand architecture from a distance. Contrast that with a miniaturist like Satie, whose delicate compositions reveal a man in love with detail. (It’s only the giants like Bach, Cézanne, and Shakespeare who could work in many focal lengths.)

But that's the point. Each of us is hard-wired a certain way. And that hard-wiring insinuates itself into our work. That's not a bad thing. Actually, it's what the world expects from you. We want our artists to take the mundane materials of our lives, run it through their imaginations, and surprise us. If you are by nature a loner, a crusader, an outsider, a jester, a romantic, a melancholic, or any one of a dozen personalities, that quality will shine through in your work.

Robert Benchley wrote that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don't. I guess I've always been one who does.

I have issues with ambiguity, preferring my distinctions to be black or white. I don't like gray. That's how I am. I recognize, of course, that some people do like gray. (I also recognize that I'm doing it again—dividing the world into two kinds of people.) Thus, I am always making these clear distinctions in my work, my daily routines, my colleagues, and my goals. Dancers are either acceptable (great) or not (everything less than great). Producers are either good or evil. Colleagues are either committed or missing in action. Critics are either my friends or enemies. The polar distinctions can go on forever.

If one set of polarities defines my creative DNA, it is the way I find myself pulled between *involvement* and *detachment*.

I shuttle back and forth from one extreme to the other, with no rest in between. And I apply it to everything.

With my dancers, for example, I have an annoying need for proof of their allegiance to me and my projects. So I'm always running through a mental checklist to see if their work habits are as exacting as mine, searching with forensic intensity for evidence of their commitment. Do they show up on time for rehearsal? Are they warmed up? Does their energy flag when rehearsals break down or are they committed to pushing forward? Are they bringing ideas to the party or waiting for me to provide everything? These are my personal pop quizzes to gauge other people's involvement. I don't want them merely involved. I'm looking for insane commitment.

I'm no less strict with myself. I'm always taking temperature readings of my commitment to a project and pushing myself to be more committed than anyone else. At its extreme, I put myself at the center of a piece, even as a dancer, trying on the roles.

When I've learned all I can at the core of a piece, I pull back and become the Queen of Detachment. I move so far back that I become a surrogate for the audience. I see the work the way they will see it. New, fresh, objectively. In the theater, I frequently go to the back and watch the dancers rehearse. If I could watch from farther away, from outside the theater in the street, I would. That's how much detachment I need from my work in order to understand it.

This impulse comes naturally. I grew up in the foothills of San Bernardino, where there was no community to speak of, no neighbors and playmates. I watched movies in a drive-in theater from a distance. I was even distanced from my twin brothers and my sister, who were all younger than I. They lived at one end of our house, I lived at the other so I could be free to maintain my rigorous practice schedule alone. You could even say I was detached from my world by my schedule. That's why detachment is part of my DNA. I was born with it, and it was continually drummed into me thereafter.

Was it there from the start? Who's to say, but my mother told me that at birth I was a noisy, ill-mannered baby in the hospital. The only way the nurses could shut me up was to put me out in the hallway by myself where I could see everything going on around me. I quieted down instantly. Even then, I didn't want to be on the inside, crowded with other people. I wanted to be on the outside, watching.

For the longest time, I thought this dichotomy of involvement versus detachment was merely a template for my work habits. Immerse yourself in the details of the work. Commit yourself to mastering every aspect. At the same time, step back to see if the work scans, if it's intelligible to an unwashed audience. Don't get so involved that you lose what you're trying to say. This was the yin and yang of my work life: Dive in. Step back. Dive in. Step back.

It was how I saw the world—like being nearsighted rather than having 20/20 vision. I was stuck with it.

And then one day, reading Carl Kerenyi's *Dionysos*, I discovered a broader context for these divisions. Involvement and detachment explained how I worked, but they didn't explain why I produced the work I did. It had always irked me that my dances shied away from telling a story, and when I tried my hand at a narrative-driven dance, the result was weak or unfocused. Why was that? Why was I better at one than the other? An answer came from the ancient Greeks, who had two words, *zoe* and *bios*, to distinguish the two competing natures I felt within myself.

Zoe and *bios* both mean life in Greek, but they are not synonymous. *Zoe*, wrote Kerenyi, refers to "life in general, without characterization." *Bios* characterizes a specific life, the outlines that distinguish one living thing from another. *Bios* is the Greek root for "biography," *zoe* for "zoology."

I cannot overstate what a profound distinction this was. Suddenly, two states of experience were made plain to me.

Zoe is like seeing Earth from space. You get the sense of life on the rotating globe, but without a sense of the individual lives being lived on the planet. *Bios* involves swooping down from space from the perch of a high-powered spy satellite, closing in on the scene, and seeing the details. *Bios* distinguishes between one life and another. *Zoe* refers to the aggregate.

Bios accommodates the notion of death, that each life has a beginning, middle, and end, that each life contains a story. *Zoe*, wrote Kerenyi, "does not admit of the experience of its own destruction: it is experienced without end, as infinite life."

The difference between *zoe* and *bios* is like the difference between sacred and profane. Sacred art is *zoe*-driven; profane art stems from *bios*.

I realize that these are just words. But they articulated a distinction that made my entire creative output clearer. Applying it to two of my choreographic heroes, Robbins and George Balanchine, I could appreciate in a new way the difference between these two men.

Balanchine was the essence of *zoe*. Most of his ballets are beautiful plotless structures that mirror the music rather than interpret it. They do not need language

to explain themselves, nor do they try to tell a story. Their content is the essence of life, not the details of living. Balanchine's steps and gestures are not specific—for example, a man miming the act of pulling out an imaginary chair for a woman or, more tritely, putting hands to heart to express love. People think his dances are abstract at first—where's the story? what's the plot? But their *zoe* qualities reveal themselves with powerful results. Balanchine's gestures and steps pluck chords in us that we cannot easily name. Yet they resonate. They seem familiar. That's the genius of Balanchine. In his movement he created a grammar that expressed congruencies between the natural world and our emotional world. Three women unbundle their long hair at the end of *Serenade* and we feel something, without attaching a name to it, because there is a common structure between the dancers' gestures and some gesture we remember that moved us.

Robbins, on the other hand, was pure *bios*—and brilliant at it. When he created a dance, he was always accumulating details about the roles—from what the characters would wear to whom they were sleeping with—and out of these details of life he would construct an engaging narrative. This is why he had such a crowd-pleasing career in the theater. (This is a giant gift. Mike Nichols tells a story about getting the musical *Annie* ready for Broadway. A scene that was supposed to be funny was failing to get laughs, no matter what Nichols tried. He asked Robbins to watch the scene with his practiced eye. Afterward, Nichols asked him how to fix the scene. Robbins surveyed the stage and pointed to a white towel hanging at the back of the set. "That towel should be yellow," he said. "That's it?" thought Nichols. "That makes the scene work?" But he made the change and the scene got a laugh every night thereafter.)

As a man of *bios*, a master of details, he could tell a story that had, as a subtext, what Balanchine made a text of—namely, life.

One approach was not more valid than the other. The two men simply entered their work through different doors.

But I could see that everything I did was a duel between the warring impulses of *bios* and *zoe* in me. On the one hand, there was my ability to create

dances about a life force. On the other, there was my occasional urge to break away from this and create dances that tell a specific story. The first kind of dances came naturally to me, the latter required more of an effort. In my heart I am a woman more of *zoe* than of *bios*.

I suspect many people never get a handle on their creative identity this way. They take their urges, their biases, their work habits for granted. But a little self-knowledge goes a long way. If you understand the strands of your creative DNA, you begin to see how they mutate into common threads in your work. You begin to see the “story” that you’re trying to tell; why you do the things you do (both positive and self-destructive); where you are strong and where you are weak (which prevents a lot of false starts), and how you see the world and function in it.

Take the following questionnaire. If even one answer tells you something new about yourself, you’re one step closer to understanding your creative DNA. There are no right or wrong answers here. The exercise is intended for your eyes only, which means no cheating, no answers to impress other people. It’s supposed to be an honest self-appraisal of what matters to you. Anything less is a distortion. I include it here and urge you to answer quickly, instinctively. Don’t dawdle.

(To get you started, I give you my answers on pages 54 to 59.)

Your Creative Autobiography

1. What is the first creative moment you remember?
2. Was anyone there to witness or appreciate it?
3. What is the best idea you've ever had?
4. What made it great in your mind?
5. What is the dumbest idea?
6. What made it stupid?
7. Can you connect the dots that led you to this idea?
8. What is your creative ambition?
9. What are the obstacles to this ambition?
10. What are the vital steps to achieving this ambition?
11. How do you begin your day?
12. What are your habits? What patterns do you repeat?
13. Describe your first successful creative act.
14. Describe your second successful creative act.
15. Compare them.

16. What are your attitudes toward: money, power, praise, rivals, work, play?
17. Which artists do you admire most?
18. Why are they your role models?
19. What do you and your role models have in common?
20. Does anyone in your life regularly inspire you?
21. Who is your muse?
22. Define muse.
23. When confronted with superior intelligence or talent, how do you respond?
24. When faced with stupidity, hostility, intransigence, laziness, or indifference in others, how do you respond?
25. When faced with impending success or the threat of failure, how do you respond?
26. When you work, do you love the process or the result?
27. At what moments do you feel your reach exceeds your grasp?
28. What is your ideal creative activity?
29. What is your greatest fear?
30. What is the likelihood of either of the answers to the previous two questions happening?
31. Which of your answers would you most like to change?
32. What is your idea of mastery?
33. What is your greatest dream?

I devised this questionnaire because it forces us to go back to our origins, our earliest memories, our first causes. We change through life, but we cannot deny our sources, and this test is one way to recall those roots.

The better you know yourself, the more you will know when you are playing to your strengths and when you are sticking your neck out. Venturing out of your comfort zone may be dangerous, yet you do it anyway because our ability to grow is directly proportional to an ability to entertain the uncomfortable.

I've always admired the playwright Neil Simon. In economic terms and mass acceptance, he's probably the most successful playwright of the twentieth century. He wrote beautifully constructed parlor comedies that provided a laugh every twenty seconds. That was his gift, and it was a rare talent. I'm sure there are snobs who tried to dismiss Neil Simon as a joke mechanic producing a hit a year. I don't see it that way. I look over his enormous output—three dozen plays, a dozen original screenplays—and see a paragon of habitual creativity. More to the point, I see a writer constantly stretching. He pushed his talent more than most people appreciate. He didn't go against his nature and try to write dramas like Eugene O'Neill—he was too smart for that—but he was always injecting into his plays dark elements and serious themes that tested his abilities and made his audience stretch, too. Where his strengths for comedy could cover his experiments, his stretches, he knew he could go for it. There is a large gap in time and ambition between *Barefoot in the Park* in 1961 and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Lost in Yonkers* in 1990. But both plays are recognizably Neil Simon. He had a good sense of who he was and how far he could venture beyond his comfort zone.

Another thing about knowing who you are is that you know what you should not be doing, which can save you a lot of heartaches and false starts if you catch it early on.

I was giving a lecture to students at Vassar not long ago. Working with the students' autobiographies, I invited a dance student, a music student who brought his saxophone, and an art student to join me on stage. I asked the dancer

to improvise some movement from a tuck position on the floor. I asked the saxophone player to accompany the dancer. And I asked the art student to assign colors to what they were doing. I admit I was constructing a three-ring circus in the lecture hall. But my goal was to bring the three students together by forcing them to work off the same page, and also to free them up to discover how far they could go improvising on this simple assignment.

When I asked the art student to read out loud his color impressions, everyone in the hall was taken aback. He droned on and on about himself, feelings he'd had, stories about friends. Not a word about color. Finally I heard "limpid blue" come out of his mouth. I waved my arms, signaling him to stop reading.

"Do you realize," I said, "that you've just recited about five hundred words in an assignment about color. You've covered everything under the sun, and 'limpid blue' is the first time you've mentioned a color? I'm not convinced you want to be a painter."

As far as I was concerned, this young man was in "DNA denial." I gave him a painterly exercise and he gave me a text-heavy response. A young man with painting in his genes would be rattling off colors immediately. Instead, his vivid use of language—limpid blue does not come in tubes—suggested that he really ought to be a writer.

It would be presumptuous of me to think I had him pegged for a writer, not a painter, after that brief encounter. But if I got him to re-examine what he's built for, then he was a step or two ahead of most people.

I had a similar moment in my early years as a choreographer. I was at my worktable making sketches of dancers and their costumes. As I leaned back to admire the sketches, there was a fleeting moment when I actually whispered to myself "I could have been a painter."

I wonder how many people get sidetracked from their true calling by the fact that they have talent to excel at more than one artistic medium. This is a curse rather than a blessing. If you have only one option, you can't make a wrong choice. If you have two options, you have a fifty percent chance of being wrong.

It's like a great high school athlete who plays football, basketball, and baseball equally well. If this athlete wants to continue playing sports at the highest collegiate level, at some point he will have to commit to one sport over the others. He'll weigh a lot of factors: what comes naturally to him, what does he enjoy the most, in which sport does he have a natural advantage over the competition in terms of size, speed, endurance, and other critical measures? But in the end the choice should be based on pure instinct and self-knowledge. What sport does he feel in his muscles and bones? What sport was he born to play?

In my case, I fortunately banished the "I could have been a painter" thought out of my mind as quickly as it had appeared. Maybe I did have a talent for interpreting the world visually. Maybe I did have a knack for creating visual tableaux that entertained people. Maybe I did know how to arrange colors and objects in space. All of these are skills from the painter's tool kit. But even then I knew myself well enough to realize that no matter how much I enjoyed making sketches, the painter's life was not for me. I didn't feel it in my bones. I would tell my "story" through movement. Gotta dance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Twyla Tharp, one of America's greatest choreographers, began her career in 1965, and in the ensuing years has created more than 130 dances for her company as well as for the Joffrey Ballet, the New York City Ballet, Paris Opera Ballet, London's Royal Ballet, and American Ballet Theatre. Working to the music of everyone from Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart to Jelly Roll Morton, Frank Sinatra, and Bruce Springsteen, she is a pioneer in melding modern dance and ballet with popular music. In film, she collaborated with Milos Forman on *Hair*, *Ragtime*, and *Amadeus*. For television, she directed *Baryshnikov by Tharp*, which won two Emmy awards. For the Broadway stage, she directed the theatrical version of *Singin' in the Rain*, and in 2003 won a Tony Award for *Movin' Out*, which she conceived, directed, and choreographed to the songs of Billy Joel. She is the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship. In 1993, she was inducted into the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, and in 1997 was made an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She has received eighteen honorary doctorates. She lives and works in New York City.

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p.153: Buster Keaton, *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (United Artists, 1928), 3 stills; courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

p. 172: Two sketches of waves, from *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, compiled and edited from the original manuscripts by Jean Paul Richter (Dover Publications [1970]).

p. 241: (Left) Rembrandt, *Artist in His Studio*, c. 1627–28; photograph © 2003 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. (Right) Rembrandt, *Self Portrait with Two Circles*, c. 1665; courtesy of the English Heritage Photographic Library/Kenwood House.