

TO GRIND YOUR SPARKS AND SPARK YOUR GRIND, EMBRACE A ROUTINE

by Erik Wahl

Creativity is only half the story of creative success.

Creatives are generally thought of as eccentric people, odd birds whose capricious lives ebb and flow with their latest whims. They dress weirdly or drink too much or smoke too much or sleep with too many people, and this is, we suppose, just how they cope with the originality flowing from their wild minds into the works of their hands.

This portrait of a creative person gives a false notion about the process of creativity. First, it's an anecdotal conclusion about creativity that is based on the buzzworthy stories of creators throughout history.

The problem with buzzworthy intel is that it's often hyperbole—and it's usually only half of the story. The other half? Discipline.

This idea that great creatives embrace strict discipline seems antonymic to their characters. It's not sexy. It's not dramatic. It may even dull the theatrical polish we like to put on their lifestyles—or our own. But there's no doubt that constant creators have learned that strategic discipline is more essential than their vices and foibles will ever be. They've learned to master both the spark of creative insight, and the grind of following through to turn it into reality.

Many only know how to Ignite sparks or to Grind ideas out. Discipline came naturally to me as a Grinder.

Routine, in an intelligent man, is a sign of ambition.—W. H. Auden

I learned discipline and hard work through my father, who had translated his own hard work and attention to detail into a rewarding life as a physician.

This was my primary model when I was a boy, so I emulated it not only in my schoolwork but in the sport I played throughout high school and college: wrestling. At practice, we'd often be asked to complete ten taxing drills in a row, and we assumed that we were going to have to go to failure at each drill. I bought in and excelled. Weight lifting was a part of training so I started lifting. That also required discipline and grit. I was rewarded there, too. I started lifting more than others my age, competing and winning. Eating good food several times a day became part of my weight-lifting routine as well. I'd train twice a day and eat six times. I'd constantly read up on the latest fitness trends. Progress spoke to me. Routine made sense. When I went into the corporate world, and especially after I started my own business, I kept this up.

But there was a problem with my mental posture.

As I embraced routine in every aspect of my adult life, I became less and less aware of what else was around me: less aware of my external environment—especially more efficient, creative opportunities for progress and growth; and less aware of my internal environment—that place in my spirit that was asking for more than predictable destinations. While I was blinkered by the pursuit of corporate success, I missed many sparks along the way. That led not only to my corporate demise but also my complete emptiness thereafter. The lesson I had to learn was how to be disciplined as a creator—as

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both a Grinder and an Igniter. There's a difference. To be disciplined as a creator requires a more mindful routine that allows for fast progress and simultaneous flexibility to explore without an immediate deadline.

After I lost my business, I felt the natural pull to let go of all that might hinder me—career expectations, household chores, even obligations outside my family. Still, I knew enough to know I couldn't just float off into space and return to reality when it felt right. I knew nothing would get done and, besides, I felt the increasing pressure of eventually needing a paycheck. I was okay taking risks to figure things out more quickly, but I knew we'd only last so long without anything coming in.

I knew I needed to open up and keep exploring and testing so I could discover the best way to roll out and monetize this new performing artist idea inside me. But I also knew I needed to make progress, and to make progress I needed to grind out a product, even if it was an imperfect prototype.

This pressure from both sides is where you will find yourself as you seek a more constant stream of creativity, and you should know it's a perfectly natural feeling initially. It's a good one, too, even if it doesn't feel that way right away.

How the Spark and the Grind Work Together

Creativity within the right structure is like a river with banks. Ideas move faster in the current of your work

and yet there is still room for them to deepen and even accelerate as needed by narrowing the banks.

I had to learn how to deploy this sort of structure when I began to let my inner Igniter breathe. As I've said, my dominant instinct was to let my ideas take me wherever they wanted because I had spent nearly a decade with a rigid routine. But my inner monologue told me to be wary of falling prey to this approach again. Had I reacted according to my emotions, I would never have learned to perform the way I do on stage today.

To learn how to paint well and fast, I had to create an environment where daily I could both think freely and also take chances with immediate action. The only way I could do this was to establish boundaries for not only my time and energy but my goals. I wouldn't just let myself get away with spending the day pondering, especially when I needed to construct a new income stream. While I certainly had to figure out what the art world had to offer me—or perhaps better said, what I had to offer it—I still made myself write down or type up ideas or, best of all, test them out. When I really thought I was onto something, I would immediately go to work and close in the riverbanks. This is what it took for me to learn to paint.

Painting on a Black Canvas

For instance, take a celebrity like U2 lead singer Bono, one of my early subjects. When I painted him the first time, I worked almost the entire day to produce a photorealistic portrait. Then I evaluated and studied it, and then went at it again, trying to knock it out in four hours. I repeated that same process until I was able to complete the painting in an hour, then thirty-six minutes, then fourteen minutes. It took me about three months to compress that painting down to a three-minute burst. When I was just getting started, I'd complete at least fifty iterations to master a three-minute speed painting. Without a commitment to that routine, I'd have nothing to perform. I doubt anyone would want to watch a guy paint for four hours.

But here's an important point about this routine. I learned to step back and assess my work and see how

I could improve it, which in this particular case meant not only creating a more realistic picture but also creating one with fewer strokes of the paintbrush. By allowing for these strategic big-picture sessions after each painting was complete, I sparked an important technical innovation in my work.

I started out painting on a traditional white canvas, until I surmised that if I painted on a black canvas, the dark voids between my paint strokes would naturally create the contour and shadow, saving time. This was a small but critical idea that I began to test immediately. I had to learn to paint in a slightly different manner, more reserved and careful, with strategically placed strokes that allowed the black backdrop to work for me and not against me, which was difficult and time-consuming. But I knew this new approach was a spark with promise, so I kept with the routine, producing a painting, then panning back out to study and evaluate, then grinding it out again. Within a year, I had mastered the new method of painting and I subsequently switched to all black canvases from that day forward.

It's one thing to embrace structure to get an idea in your head into a tangible form. It's an entirely different thing to take that tangible creation and mold it into something that is distinctive and memorable. Many creators get the product finished and then move on to the next product. That can be a mistake. Often, the initial product still contains some embers that just need a little more stoking to ignite a bigger flame.

The more I painted these black canvases, the quicker I could go from a first attempt of a likeness to a three-minute photorealistic burst. What once took me three months to master eventually took me a week. My routine got me that far, but I knew there wasn't much about my skill that was truly distinct. There were other artists who could paint well and fast. I needed to continue improving in one way or another. So when I wasn't painting, my free time was spent studying with an art instructor I'll call Cynthia. She was one of the few who could teach me a style few painters ever attempt. I knew if I could pull it off, the experience I offered onstage would be perfect for an audience

seeking a visceral experience of creativity. This novel method would keep them on the edge of their seats, completely unaware of what I was painting, and then gradually the strokes would build to a crescendo until finally I would flip the canvas and voila: “Holy crap, he just did a painting in three minutes—upside down!”

That became a big differentiator for me. Again, I ground out the spark with strict routine and went backward in my productivity for a season in order to master a method that would eventually move me further forward. I knew plenty of speakers on the circuit talked about creativity. But if I showed an audience creativity, not something that just registered in their heads but an experience that helped them truly feel the presence of creativity in their own bodies and minds, I knew I had something incredibly unique and memorable. Grinding out that spark with a rigorous and initially counterproductive routine turned into a steady fire that still burns today.

Continuing to Grind Your Sparks

Within three years, I was booking a hundred shows a year, and my rates steadily increased. During that time, I still regularly tinkered with my routine until I found the one that kept me performing at a high level while allowing my presentation to continue evolving into more effective iterations.

This is an important point. Once I had created something and began selling it regularly—once

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I officially became a keynote speaker (meaning, somebody paid me for it)—I became more and more comfortable with the routine of creating this particular product, especially as I locked into my sweet spot for learning new paintings and mastering them quickly. The risk of creating that product diminished over time. There was a growing temptation to just milk this creation as far as it could go in its current iteration. But being in the corporate world—especially in the world of professional speakers, where the next big one was a TED Talk away—I knew what I did would eventually grow stale. Others would model it. Someone would come along and do more. I wanted—I needed—to continuing setting my creative work apart.

When you’re at the point where a creation is working and working well, this is when your routine can either propel you further or pummel you. If you find yourself in a steady river current that’s moving along nicely with the routine you have in place, it can be all too easy to inflate a tube and enjoy the ride. But what happens to natural rivers happens to creative momentum as well. It can slow down. It can even dry up. This is what happens when you allow your routine to numb your desire for novelty, when you love routine for its ability to conserve your energy but forget its purpose in allowing you to use your energy constructively.

When your routine begins to work its magic, it’s not time to revel in the conservation of your energy. Start using those stores of energy your routine has created to create more and better creations.

Start by looking at your “finished” creations from all angles. How can you improve them? What about them isn’t particularly original? What about them isn’t signature you?

One of the ways I integrate ongoing research into my routine is to attend local live shows, particularly when I’m traveling to new cities for keynote performances. It doesn’t matter whether it’s Madonna in Miami or Bruce Springsteen in Boston—I just want to see thriving performers doing their thing and then learn something from them.

I don’t sit in the back row, either. If there is a mosh pit, I’m jumping in and getting thrashed around. I

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want to feel the heartbeat of the show and experience the dynamic relationship between performer and audience.

My ultimate goal with this element of my routine is to understand how and why these performers are successful at connecting with an audience. When and why do their crowds respond fanatically? The intel I acquire helps me continuously improve my own performances. The context even reinforces the conserve-and-create mandates of a great routine.

Building a Routine That Grinds Your Sparks

Today my preperformance routine starts the moment I am booked for a keynote. If the company is public, the very first thing I do is purchase a sizable portion of the stock. I want a pound of flesh in the game. This also helps me better understand their competitive landscape and potential pitfalls. I learn and perform differently when I am both financially and emotionally invested in the outcome.

From there, I learn everything I can about the company, from press, calls with its employees, financial reports, its position in the marketplace and relative to its competitors, and even its internal language.

Every performance is like a special ops mission. I pack up clothes, paint, and canvases, and ship them to each location. The canvases come in these cardboard boxes on which I've already stenciled celebrity portraits—when

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they arrive at the hotel a few days before the event, there's already this buzz building, this sense of mystery, this foreshadowing. I cut out all distractions, like meet and greets and special dinners. For me, that's part of the discipline. To give my best possible performance, I have to be free of distractions before and after the show. The client doesn't even know when I arrive, because I need to spend that time quietly to prepare. I ramp up, preparing myself mentally, physically, and emotionally to ensure that I make an authentic connection with the audience.

Then we launch into it. We have gone to great lengths to create epic audience experiences beyond delivery of actionable content. We have hired and worked extensively with Cirque du Soleil show producers to enhance the aesthetics and show production for the audience. We are designing and testing creativity-gear technology that is way ahead of its time and has yet to see the marketplace. But this process of ideation begets new ideas on blurring the lines between lecture and rock show.

When everything's firing, the show has both a dynamic and choreographed flow and it's a beautiful day. This is where the spark ignites and reignites for me every week.

But these sixty-minute sparks would never light without weeks and months of consistent routine. I am a free and creative spirit live from the stage, but I am a control freak with militaristic attention to detail to ensure precision and flawless execution prior to taking the stage. In truth, my routine of the past fourteen years has sparked the hour my audience sees today. And I hope it'll be fourteen years better fourteen years from now.

This is what it takes for me to remain in a state of constant creativity with my work. Without an ability to embrace my routine, I shudder to think where I'd be instead. But you should know that the ideal routine of one creator is rarely perfect for another. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to structuring your days to propel you into a daily current of creativity. Be willing to tinker some until you reach an honest understanding of what works best for you, in the moment in which you're living now. That moment will change, changing your opportunities. So find one routine whose core elements remain the same, thus allowing you to consistently use your energy efficiently and creatively.

Conclusion

It is a passion of mine to make daily, breakthrough creativity accessible to everyone in a way it was not to me when I needed it most. From experience, I know this access can happen in an instant if I can awaken the creative spirit inside an individual. It's there—I know it is—in you, in me, in all of us. So I embrace it as one of my callings in life to say: You already have a resource that can solve your toughest problems, enrich the most important roles you play, and illuminate the potential of your life for as long as you're alive. As the passion to spread this message grew in my early days of performing, so, too, did my opportunities. Once you learn how to unleash the power of disciplined creativity, you won't just make things happen ... You'll make great things.

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