

THE BIG IDEAS

The Ultimate Art

= Your life.

Habits

How are yours?

Imperfectly Imperfect

Kintsugi, scars, tattoos, and you.

Creative Puzzles

Start with the edge pieces.

You, the Hero

Play your role well.

The Creative Act

A Way of Being

BY RICK RUBIN · PENGUIN PRESS © 2023 · 432 PAGES

“Nothing in this book
is known to be true.
It’s a reflection on what I’ve noticed—
Not facts so much as thoughts.

Some ideas may resonate,
others may not.
A few may awaken an inner knowing
you forgot you had.
Use what’s helpful.
Let go of the rest.

Each of these moments
is an invitation
to further inquiry:
looking deeper,
zooming out, or in.
Opening possibilities
for a new way of being.”

~ Rick Rubin from *The Creative Act*

*“Attuned by attuned choice,
your entire life is a form of
self-expression. You exist as
a creative being in a creative
universe. A singular work
of art.”*

~ Rick Rubin

Rick Rubin is an iconic music producer.

He’s worked with some of the best musicians in the world—from Adele, Tom Petty, and Johnny Cash to the Beastie Boys, Jay-Z, and LL Cool J.

He’s also the co-founder of Def Jam Recordings and former co-President of Columbia Records.

And, he’s a Transcendental Meditation practitioner who writes with the same lucidity as Yuval Noah Harari whose preferred flavor of meditation happens to be Vipassana.

This book is the distillation of the wisdom he’s gained working on himself and his craft over the last forty years. It’s PHENOMENAL. I highly recommend it. Get a copy [here](#).

From the minimalist cover to the short, pithy micro chapters (both of which inspired my book [Areté](#)), the book itself is a work of art.

It’s packed with profound wisdom on how to create great art and how to make your *life* your ultimate masterpiece. I’m excited to share some of my favorite Big Ideas so let’s jump straight in.

THE ULTIMATE ART

“To support our practice, we might set up a daily schedule, where we engage in particular rituals at specific times every day or week.

"No matter what tools you use to create, the instrument is you. And through you, the universe that surrounds us all comes into focus."

~ Rick Rubin

The gestures we perform don't need to be grand. Small rituals can make a big difference.

We can decide to take three slow, deep breaths upon awakening each morning. This simple act can set a course to start each day still, centered, and in the moment.

We might also eat our meals mindfully, slowly savoring each bite with appreciation. Take a daily walk in nature, looking at everything entering our field of vision with gratitude and connection. Take a moment to marvel at the feeling of our heartbeat and the movement of blood through our veins before we sleep.

The purpose of such exercises is not necessarily in the doing, just as the goal of meditation isn't the meditating. The purpose is to evolve the way we see the world when we're not engaged in these acts. We are building the musculature of our psyche to more acutely tune in. This is so much of what the work is about.

Awareness needs constant refreshing. If it becomes a habit, even a good habit, it will need to be reinvented again and again.

Until one day, you notice that you are always in the practice of awareness, at all times, in all places, living your life in a state of constant openness to receiving."

The book features brief, practical reflections on "78 Areas of Thought."

That's from one of the earlier micro-chapters on "The Practice." As I read that I thought of some of my other favorite thinkers on the subject of creativity including [Steven Pressfield](#), [Twyla Tharp](#), [Seth Godin](#), and [Austin Kleon](#).

Check out our Notes on all six of Pressfield's great books on the creative process (see [The War of Art](#), [Turning Pro](#), [Do the Work](#), [The Artist's Journey](#), [Nobody Wants to Read Your Sh*t](#), and [Put Your A** Where Your Heart Wants to Be](#)), Tharp's [The Creative Habit](#), Seth Godin's [The Practice](#), and Austin Kleon's [Steal Like an Artist](#). And, check out [Creativity 101](#) as well.

The book also features a collection of poetic reflections like this one that bookends the preceding discussion on The Practice:

*"Living life as an artist is a practice.
You are either engaging in the practice
or you're not.*

*It makes no sense to say you're not good at it.
It's like saying, 'I'm not good at being a monk.'
You are either living as a monk or you're not.*

*We tend to think of the artist's work as the
output.*

*The real work of the artist
is a way of being in the world."*

"The only practice that matters is the one you consistently do, not the practice of any other artist. Find your most creative method, apply it, and then let it go when it is no longer of use. There is no wrong way to make art."

~ Rick Rubin

When I read THAT, I thought of [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#) and wisdom from his great book on [Creativity](#) in which he tells us: "Indeed, it could be said that the most obvious achievement of these people is that they created their own lives. And how they achieved that is something worth knowing, because it can be applied to all our lives. "

The most creative act we will ever engage in? Making our LIVES a masterpiece. More specifically, getting in the habit of making each MOMENT of our lives a masterpiece.

How do we get good at that? Practice.

All of which begs the question... What are YOUR key practices that help YOU connect to something bigger than yourself so you can activate your Soul Force and give us all you've got?

"To the best of my ability, I've followed my intuition to make career turns, and been recommended against doing so every time. It helps to realize that it's better to follow the universe than those around you."

~ Rick Rubin

Got it? Awesome. Dominate that. TODAY.

P.S. This is PRECISELY why we created the Heroic app and why I hit 101 Heroic Targets per day in the app. As we discuss in our [+1 on Campfires and Chairs](#), our connection to our best selves needs to be recreated all day every day.

P.P.S. Rubin ALSO has a micro-chapter on "Habits." You know who and what he talks about in this section? John Wooden teaching his athletes how to put on their socks. Then he says...

HABITS

"It must have been frustrating for these elite athletes, who wanted to get on the court and show what they could do, to arrive at practice for the first time with this legendary coach only to hear him say, Today we will learn to tie our shoes.

The point Wooden was making was that creating effective habits, down to the smallest detail, is what makes the difference between winning and losing games. Each habit might seem small, but added together, they have an exponential effect on performance. Just one habit, at the top of any field, can be enough to give an edge over the competition.

Wooden considered every aspect of the game where an issue might arise, and trained his players for each one. Repeatedly. Until they became habits.

The goal was immaculate performance. Wooden often said the only person you're ever competing against is yourself. The rest is out of your control.

This way of thinking applies to the creative life just as well. For both the artist and the athlete, the details matter, whether the players recognize their importance or not.

Good habits create good art. The way we do anything is the way we do everything. Treat each choice you make, each action you take, each word you speak with skillful care. The goal is to live your life in service of art."

As you know if you've been following along, [John Wooden](#) is one of my heroes.

As Rubin points out, Wooden won more consecutive games and championships than ANYONE in history—which is why he's considered one of, if not THE greatest coaches in history.

And... What did this GREAT coach do on the VERY first day of the very first practice? He taught his players how to put on their socks and tie their shoes.

The fundamentals matter. A lot. Which is why [Robin Sharma](#) says that, ultimately, greatness is consistency on the fundamentals.

As I reflect on this wisdom, I think of the day I spent with THE top commanding officers of the U.S. Special Forces Command last week.

I was blessed to receive an invitation from USSOCOM's commanding officer, four-star General Bryan P. Fenton. GEN Fenton is a fan of Heroic and my work. He and his team asked me to discuss Resiliency during a virtual workshop with hundreds of his top special forces commanders around the world as part of their "First SOF Truth" series of workshops.

The "First SOF Truth" is simple: People are more important than hardware.

I took about a dozen pages of notes during the day.

The amount of PRACTICAL wisdom discussed that day was extraordinary.

Getting the small things right is literally a matter of life and death for these elite forces protecting the freedoms on which our flourishing is so dependent.

In his opening remarks, GEN Fenton discussed their commitment to "Relentlessly trying to

"Crafting contains a paradox. To create our best work, we are patient and avoid rushing the process, while at the same time we work quickly without delay."

~ Rick Rubin

"The recognition of abundance fills us with hope that our brightest ideas still await us and our greatest work is yet to come."

~ Rick Rubin

"If there's a rule to creativity that's less breakable than the others, it's that the need for patience is ever-present."

~ Rick Rubin

improve." And, he emphasized the fact that they need to repeat core behaviors "over and over and over again until we never get it wrong."

If we want to show up as our best—whether that's on the literal or metaphorical battlefields of our lives, we **MUST** win the primary battle within our own minds.

We do that by having the wisdom to know the ultimate game and how to play it well **AND** the discipline to do what needs to get done whether we feel like it or not.

How do we do THAT? By getting clarity on the simple **HABITS** we engage in when we're at our best. Then closing the gap and forging antifragile confidence with every thought and action we take—dominating the most basic fundamentals **ALL DAY, EVERY DAY, ESPECIALLY TODAY.**

P.S. As I typed that, I also thought of the wisdom from another American Hero who spoke at the event: Vice Admiral Tim Szymanski. At one point during his session, VADM Szymanski said that resiliency is being "tough in the moment, every moment."

I started my talk at the end of the day by referencing his definition of resiliency. Then I extended his definition to include our idea of **ANTIFRAGILITY** by saying that we need to be tough in the moment, every moment **ESPECIALLY** when we don't *feel* like it. The worse we feel, the more committed we are to the protocol. Period.

P.P.S. Wisdom from a recent session with [Phil Stutz](#) comes to mind as well. He told me: "*The enemy is your own violation of your own rules.*" <- That's a (very!) Big Idea.

YOUR IMPERFECTLY PERFECT WORK OF ART

"In Japanese pottery, there's an art form of repair called kintsugi. When a piece of ceramic pottery breaks, rather than trying to restore it to its original condition, the artisan accentuates the fault by using gold to fill the crack. This beautifully draws attention to where the work was broken, creating a golden vein. Instead of the flaw diminishing the work, it becomes the focal point, an area of both physical and aesthetic strength. The scar also tells the story of the piece, chronicling its past experience.

We can apply this same technique to our lives and embrace our imperfections. Whatever insecurities we have can be reframed as a guiding force in our creativity. They only become a hindrance when they prevent our ability to share what's closest to our heart."

I absolutely love the idea of kintsugi. We talked about it in a +1 called "[Wearing Scars As Medals: What a Hero Does with the Dragon Claw Marks.](#)"

We also discussed a similar idea in our Notes on [What Doesn't Kill Us: The New Psychology of Posttraumatic Growth](#) by [Stephen Joseph](#). Joseph's book is all about how we can alchemize trauma to shift from post traumatic **STRESS** disorder to posttraumatic **GROWTH**.

He tells us that there are times when a vase is *so shattered* that we can't put it back together. Instead, we need to use the shards to create something entirely new.

Whenever I think of scars and making the broken parts of us a part of our ultimate art project that is a life well-lived, I also think of [Paulo Coelho](#) and my favorite band, The Score.

Coelho tells us: "*I don't regret my painful times, I bare my scars as if they were medals.*"

Then there's my favorite band, The Score. I've listened to their songs hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of times. In one of their songs ([it's called "Enemies"; check it out here](#)), they say: "*All my scars are tattoos, they're a work of art.*" <- I remember the first time I heard that and said (goosebumps) "YES!!"

btw. As I Googled that Coelho quote, I found another post he made on the subject several years ago: "*Don't hide your scars. Scars are medals branded on flesh, & enemies will be frightened by*

" Maybe the best idea is the one you're going to come up with this evening."

~ Rick Rubin

them because they are proof of your long experience of battle. Often this will lead them to seek dialogue & avoid conflict. Scars speak more loudly than the sword that caused them."

THE CREATIVE PUZZLES OF LIFE

"When you're on a roll in the Craft phase, work toward a full first draft. Maintain the momentum. If you reach a section of the work that gives you trouble, instead of letting this blockage stop you, work around it. Although your instinct may be to create sequentially, bypass the section where you're stuck, complete the other parts, then come back to it.

Sometimes solutions to these difficult pieces will reveal themselves once the overall context has emerged. A bridge is easier to build when it's clear what's on either side of it.

Another benefit is that if you are stuck at a section in the middle, it may feel overwhelming to know you're only halfway through the work. If you finish the rest of the draft and return to the portion you skipped, it feels more easily achievable when there's only 5 or 10 percent of the project left to complete. With the end in sight, it's easier to feel motivated to finish.

If you're holding a center puzzle piece in your hand and staring at an empty tabletop, it's difficult to determine where to place it. If all of the puzzle is complete except for that one piece, then you know exactly where it goes. The same is generally true of art. The more of the work you can see, the easier it becomes to gracefully place the final details clearly where they belong."

I read this book while crafting my own book.

To say that it was EXTREMELY helpful would be an understatement. I found inspiration in everything from Rubin's cover design style (minimalist aesthetic, hardcover book with no dust jacket, printed straight on the cover, etc.) to the pithy micro-chapters. I even modeled our table of contents after his. And, of course, the CONTENT of the book was even more impactful.

I just love the image of building a bridge and building a puzzle. Imagine sitting there with a center puzzle piece staring at a blank table top wondering where the piece goes. Then imagine starting with the obvious edge pieces and working your way through the easier parts until you arrive at that tricky center piece and know *exactly* where it goes.

This is why we use the metaphor of the puzzle throughout our work together. (See +1s on [The Puzzle of Life](#), [#1 Tip for Life Puzzles](#), [How to Make Easy Hard](#), and [Just Get Started!](#) for more.)

I followed the wisdom from the passage above as I crafted [Areté](#). The hardest part of the book was actually the introduction/early chapters. I mean... How do you explain what Areté is to someone who has NEVER heard of the word?

Hmmm... I wasn't sure. So... I hammered curating/organizing/polishing all 451 of the micro-chapter ideas. Then, one morning, when the book was basically DONE except for the introduction, I had the experience with Emerson that led to the PERFECT set of stories to introduce the concept of Areté while introducing the reader to my family in the process.

It clicked. Boom. DONE.

YOU, THE HERO OF YOUR LIFE'S STORY

"Consider detaching from the story of your life as it's happening.

The manuscript of the novel you've worked on for years is lost in a fire. Your romantic relationship breaks up when you thought it was going well. You lose a job you care about. As hard as it may seem, seek to experience events like these as if you're watching a movie. You're observing a dramatic scene where the protagonist faces a seemingly insurmountable challenge.

It's you, but it's not you.

"Talented artists who are unskilled editors can do subpar work and fail to live up to their gift's promise. Avoid confusing the editor's cold detachment with the inner critic. The critic doubts the work, undermines it, zooms in and picks it apart. The editor steps back, views the work holistically, and supports its full potential. The editor is the professional in the poet."

~ Rick Rubin

"The best work is the work you are excited about."

~ Rick Rubin

Instead of sinking in to the pain of heartbreak or the stress of being laid off or the grief of loss, if practicing detachment the response might be: I wasn't expecting that plot twist. I wonder what's going to happen to our hero next.

There's always a next scene, and that next scene may be one of great beauty and fulfillment. The hard times were the required setup to allow these new possibilities to come into being.

The outcome is not the outcome. The darkness is not an end point, nor is the daylight. They live in a continually unfolding, mutually dependent cycle. Neither is good or bad. They simply exist.

This practice—of never assuming any experience you have is the whole story—will support you in a life of open possibility and equanimity. When we obsessively focus on these events, they may appear catastrophic. But they're just a small aspect of a larger life, and the further you zoom back, the smaller each experience becomes.

Zoom in and obsess. Zoom out and observe. We get to choose."

My goodness there's a lot we can chat about in that passage.

I'll skip the chat we could have on [radical acceptance](#), [loving what is](#), [the art of acquiescence](#), etc. We'll focus on the brilliant idea of imagining ourselves as the Hero of an unfolding story.

The Heroic gods have blessed you with a wonderful challenge. "It's you, but it's not you."

I wonder what's going to happen next?

Here's what I know. And what I know YOU know...

As we discuss in our Notes on [The Hero on a Mission](#), we need to remember that *no one* would pay to watch a movie in which the HERO acts like a VICTIM.

And, much more importantly, you're not going to want to fully live *your* life if you're showing up like a victim and complaining about all of your challenges.

The Heroic gods have blessed you with a fantastic plot-twist challenge.

Perfect. It's time to show us what you've got.

It's time to engage in THE most "Creative Act" of your life.

Close the gap. Live with Areté. Give us all you've got.

TODAY.

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

If you liked this Note, you'll probably like...

[Creativity, The War of Art, Do the Work, Turing Pro, Steal Like an Artist, The Practice, Hero on a Mission, What Doesn't Kill Us, Paulo Coelho](#)

About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of [Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential](#). He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. As a Founder/CEO he's made crowdfunding history and built and sold two social platforms. As a Philosopher/teacher, he's helped millions of people from around the world, trained 10,000+ [Heroic Coaches](#) from 100+ countries and created a protocol that science says changes lives. He lives in the country outside Austin, Texas, with his wife, Alexandra, and their two kids, Emerson and Eleanor. Learn more at [heroic.us](#).