

PERSISTENCE

Marcus Aurelius

Chimes In

I've long been inspired by the private diaries of the second-century Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. The wise philosopher-king never intended that his meditations be published, but I'm grateful that they were. I find it encouraging to watch this brilliant man, two thousand years ago, trying to keep up his motivation to be creative and brave and searching. His frustrations and his self-cajoling sound amazingly contemporary (or maybe just eternal and universal). You can hear him working through all the same questions that we all must work through in our lives: *Why am I here? What have I been called to do? How am I getting in my own way? How can I best live out my destiny?*

I especially love watching Marcus Aurelius fighting his perfectionism in order to get back to work on his writing, regardless of the results. "Do what nature demands," he writes to himself. "Get a move on—if you have it in you—and don't worry whether anyone will give you credit for it. And don't go expecting Plato's *Republic*; be satisfied with

even the smallest progress, and treat the outcome of it all as unimportant."

Please tell me I'm not the only one who finds it endearing and encouraging that a legendary Roman philosopher had to reassure himself that *it's okay not to be Plato*.

Really, Marcus, it's okay!

Just keep working.

Through the mere act of creating something—anything—you might inadvertently produce work that is magnificent, eternal, or important (as Marcus Aurelius did, after all, with his *Meditations*). You might not, on the other hand. But if your calling is to make things, then you still have to make things in order to live out your highest creative potential—and also in order to remain sane. Possessing a creative mind, after all, is something like having a border collie for a pet: It needs to work, or else it will cause you an outrageous amount of trouble. Give your mind a job to do, or else it will find a job to do, and you might not like the job it invents (eating the couch, digging a hole through the living room floor, biting the mailman, etc.). It has taken me years to learn this, but it does seem to be the case that if I am not actively creating something, then I am probably actively destroying something (myself, a relationship, or my own peace of mind).

## BIG MAGIC

I firmly believe that we all need to find something to do in our lives that stops us from eating the couch. Whether we make a profession out of it or not, we all need an activity that is beyond the mundane and that takes us out of our established and limiting roles in society (mother, employee, neighbor, brother, boss, etc.). We all need something that helps us to forget ourselves for a while—to momentarily forget our age, our gender, our socioeconomic background, our duties, our failures, and all that we have lost and screwed up. We need something that takes us so far out of ourselves that we forget to eat, forget to pee, forget to mow the lawn, forget to resent our enemies, forget to brood over our insecurities. Prayer can do that for us, community service can do it, sex can do it, exercise can do it, and substance abuse can most certainly do it (albeit with god-awful consequences)—but creative living can do it, too. Perhaps creativity's greatest mercy is this: By completely absorbing our attention for a short and magical spell, it can relieve us temporarily from the dreadful burden of being who we are. Best of all, at the end of your creative adventure, you have a souvenir—something that you *made*, something to remind you forever of your brief but transformative encounter with inspiration.

That's what my books are to me: souvenirs of journeys

172

## PERSISTENCE

that I took, in which I managed (blessedly) to escape myself for a little while.

An abiding stereotype of creativity is that it turns people crazy. I disagree: *Not* expressing creativity turns people crazy. ("If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you don't bring forth what is within you, what you don't bring forth will destroy you.")

—Gospel of Thomas.) Bring forth what is within you, then, whether it succeeds or fails. Do it whether the final product (your souvenir) is crap or gold. Do it whether the critics love you or hate you—or whether the critics have never heard of you and perhaps never will hear of you. Do it whether people get it or don't get it.

It doesn't have to be perfect, and you don't have to be Plato.

It's all just an instinct and an experiment and a mystery, so begin.

Begin anywhere. Preferably right now.

And if greatness should ever accidentally stumble upon you, let it catch you hard at work.

Hard at work, and sane.

173

## Nobody's Thinking About You

Long ago, when I was in my insecure twenties, I met a clever, independent, creative, and powerful woman in her mid-seventies, who offered me a superb piece of life wisdom.

She said: "We all spend our twenties and thirties trying so hard to be perfect, because we're so worried about what people will think of us. Then we get into our forties and fifties, and we finally start to be free, because we decide that we don't give a damn what anyone thinks of us. But you won't be completely free until you reach your sixties and seventies, when you finally realize this liberating truth—*nobody was ever thinking about you, anyhow.*"

They aren't. They weren't. They never were.

People are mostly just thinking about themselves. People don't have time to worry about what you're doing, or how well you're doing it, because they're all caught up in their own dramas. People's attention may be drawn to you for a moment (if you succeed or fail spectacularly and publicly, for instance), but that attention will soon enough

revert right back to where it's always been—*on themselves.* While it may seem lonely and horrible at first to imagine that you aren't anyone else's first order of business, there is also a great release to be found in this idea. You are free, because everyone is too busy fussing over themselves to worry all that much about you.

Go be whomever you want to be, then.

Do whatever you want to do.

Pursue whatever fascinates you and brings you to life.

Create whatever you want to create—and let it be stupendously imperfect, because it's exceedingly likely that nobody will even notice.

And that's *awesome.*

## Done Is Better Than Good

The only reason I was able to persist in completing my first novel was that I allowed it to be stupendously imperfect. I pushed myself to continue writing it, even though I strongly disapproved of what I was producing. That book was so far from perfect, it made me nuts. I remember

It's time to give creativity back to the tricksters, is what I say.

~~The trickster is obviously a charming and subversive figure. But for me, the most wonderful thing about a good trickster is that he trusts. It may seem counterintuitive to suggest this, because he can seem so slippery and shady, but the trickster is full of trust. He trusts himself, obviously. He trusts his own cunning, his own right to be here, his own ability to land on his feet in any situation. To a certain extent, of course, he also trusts other people (in that he trusts them to be marks for his shrewdness). But mostly, the trickster trusts the universe. He trusts in its chaotic, lawless, ever-fascinating ways—and for this reason, he does not suffer from undue anxiety. He trusts that the universe is in constant play and, specifically, that it wants to play with him.~~

~~A good trickster knows that if he cheerfully tosses a ball out into the cosmos, that ball will be thrown back at him. It might be thrown back really hard, or it might be thrown back really crooked, or it might be thrown back in a cartoonish hail of missiles, or it might not be thrown back until the middle of next year—but that ball will eventually be thrown back. The trickster waits for the ball to return, catches it however it arrives, and then tosses it back~~

~~out there into the void again, just to see what will happen. And he loves doing it, because the trickster (in all his cleverness) understands the one great cosmic truth that the martyr (in all his seriousness) can never grasp: It's all just a game.~~

~~A big, freaky, wonderful game.~~

~~Which is fine, because the trickster likes freaky.~~

~~Freaky is his natural environment.~~

~~The martyr hates freaky. The martyr wants to kill freaky. And in so doing, he all too often ends up killing himself.~~

## A Good Trickster Move

I'm friends with Brené Brown, the author of *Daring Greatly* and other works on human vulnerability. Brené writes wonderful books, but they don't come easily for her. She sweats and struggles and suffers throughout the writing process, and always has. But recently, I introduced Brené to this idea that creativity is for tricksters, not for martyrs. It was an idea she'd never heard before. (As Brené explains: "Hey, I come from a background in academia, which is

deeply entrenched in martyrdom. As in: 'You must labor and suffer for years in solitude to produce work that only four people will ever read.'")

But when Brené latched on to this idea of tricksterdom, she took a closer look at her own work habits and realized she'd been creating from far too dark and heavy a place within herself. She had already written several successful books, but all of them had been like a medieval road of trials for her—nothing but fear and anguish throughout the entire writing process. She'd never questioned any of this anguish, because she'd assumed it was all perfectly normal. After all, serious artists can only prove their merit through serious pain. Like so many creators before her, she had come to trust in that pain above all.

But when she tuned in to the possibility of writing from a place of trickster energy, she had a breakthrough. She realized that the act of writing itself was indeed genuinely difficult for her . . . but that *storytelling* was not. Brené is a captivating storyteller, and she loves public speaking. She's a fourth-generation Texan who can string a tale like nobody's business. She knew that when she spoke her ideas aloud, they flowed like a river. But when she tried to write those ideas down, they cramped up on her.

Then she figured out how to trick the process.

For her last book, Brené tried something new—a super-cunning trickster move of the highest order. She enlisted two trusted colleagues to join her at a beach house in Galveston to help her finish her book, which was under serious deadline.

She asked them to sit there on the couch and take detailed notes while she told them stories about the subject of her book. After each story, she would grab their notes, run into the other room, shut the door, and write down exactly what she had just told them, while they waited patiently in the living room. Thus, Brené was able to capture the natural tone of her own speaking voice on the page—much the way the poet Ruth Stone figured out how to capture poems as they moved through her. Then Brené would dash back into the living room and read aloud what she had just written. Her colleagues would help her to tease out the narrative even further, by asking her to explain herself with new anecdotes and stories, as again they took notes. And again Brené would grab those notes and go transcribe the stories.

By setting a trickster trap for her own storytelling, Brené figured out how to catch her own tiger by the tail.

Much laughter and absurdity were involved in this

process. They were, after all, just three girlfriends alone at a beach house. There were taco runs and visits to the Gulf. They had a blast. This scene is pretty much the exact opposite of the stereotypical image of the tormented artist sweating it out all alone in his garret studio, but as Brené told me, "I'm done with all that. Never again will I write about the subject of human connection while suffering in isolation." And her new trick worked like a charm. Never had Brené written faster, never had she written better, never had she written with such *trust*.

Mind you, this was not a book of comedy that she was writing, either. A lighthearted process does not necessarily need to result in a lighthearted product. Brené is a renowned sociologist who studies shame, after all. This was a book about vulnerability, failure, anxiety, despair, and hard-earned emotional resilience. Her book came out on the page just as deep and serious as it needed to be. It's just that she had a good time writing it, because she finally figured out how to game the system. In so doing, she finally accessed her own abundant source of Big Magic.

That's how a trickster gets the job done.

Lightly, lightly.

Ever lightly.

## Lighten Up

The first short story I ever published was in 1993, in *Esquire* magazine. The story was called "Pilgrims." It was about a girl working on a ranch in Wyoming, and it was inspired by my own experience as a girl who had worked on a ranch in Wyoming. As usual, I sent the story out to a bunch of publications, unsolicited. As usual, everyone rejected it. Except one.

A young assistant editor at *Esquire* named Tony Freund plucked my story out of the slush pile and brought it to the editor in chief, a man named Terry McDonell. Tony suspected that his boss might like the story, because he knew Terry had always been fascinated with the American West. Terry did indeed like "Pilgrims," and he purchased it, and that's how I got my first break as a writer. It was the break of a lifetime. The story was slated to appear in the November issue of *Esquire*, with Michael Jordan on the cover.

A month before the issue was to go to press, however, Tony called me to say there was a problem. A major advertiser had pulled out, and as a result the magazine would need to be several pages shorter than planned that month. Sacrifices would have to be made; they were looking for

But seriously: *Really?*

Because, think about it: *Then what?*

## Walk Proudly

**T**wenty years ago, I was at a party, talking to a guy whose name I have long since forgotten, or maybe never even knew. Sometimes I think this man came into my life for the sole purpose of telling me this story, which has delighted and inspired me ever since.

The story this guy told me was about his younger brother, who was trying to be an artist. The guy was deeply admiring of his brother's efforts, and he told me an illustrative anecdote about how brave and creative and trusting his little brother was. For the purposes of this story, which I shall now recount here, let's call the little brother "Little Brother."

Little Brother, an aspiring painter, saved up all his money and went to France, to surround himself with beauty and inspiration. He lived on the cheap, painted every day, visited museums, traveled to picturesque locations, bravely spoke to everyone he met, and showed his work to anyone who would look at it. One afternoon, Little Brother struck

up a conversation in a café with a group of charming young people, who turned out to be some species of fancy aristocrats. The charming young aristocrats took a liking to Little Brother and invited him to a party that weekend in a castle in the Loire Valley. They promised Little Brother that this was going to be the most fabulous party of the year. It would be attended by the rich, by the famous, and by several crowned heads of Europe. Best of all, it was to be a masquerade ball, where nobody skimped on the costumes. It was not to be missed. Dress up, they said, and join us!

Excited, Little Brother worked all week on a costume that he was certain would be a showstopper. He scoured Paris for materials and held back neither on the details nor the audacity of his creation. Then he rented a car and drove to the castle, three hours from Paris. He changed into his costume in the car and ascended the castle steps. He gave his name to the butler, who found him on the guest list and politely welcomed him in. Little Brother entered the ballroom, head held high.

Upon which he immediately realized his mistake.

This was indeed a costume party—his new friends had not misled him there—but he had missed one detail in translation: This was a *themed* costume party. The theme was "a medieval court."

And Little Brother was dressed as a lobster.

All around him, the wealthiest and most beautiful people of Europe were attired in gilded finery and elaborate period gowns, draped in heirloom jewels, sparkling with elegance as they waltzed to a fine orchestra. Little Brother, on the other hand, was wearing a red leotard, red tights, red ballet slippers, and giant red foam claws. Also, his face was painted red. This is the part of the story where I must tell you that Little Brother was over six feet tall and quite skinny—but with the long waving antennae on his head, he appeared even taller. He was also, of course, the only American in the room.

He stood at the top of the steps for one long, ghastly moment. He almost ran away in shame. Running away in shame seemed like the most dignified response to the situation. But he didn't run. Somehow, he found his resolve. He'd come this far, after all. He'd worked tremendously hard to make this costume, and he was proud of it. He took a deep breath and walked onto the dance floor.

He reported later that it was only his experience as an aspiring artist that gave him the courage and the license to be so vulnerable and absurd. Something in life had already taught him to just put it out there, whatever "it" is. That costume was what he had made, after all, so that's what he was bringing to the party. It was the best he had. It was *all*

he had. So he decided to trust in himself, to trust in his costume, to trust in the circumstances.

As he moved into the crowd of aristocrats, a silence fell. The dancing stopped. The orchestra stuttered to a stop. The other guests gathered around Little Brother. Finally, someone asked him what on earth he was.

Little Brother bowed deeply and announced, "I am the court lobster."

Then: laughter.

Not ridicule—just joy. They loved him. They loved his sweetness, his weirdness, his giant red claws, his skinny ass in his bright spandex tights. He was the trickster among them, and so he made the party. Little Brother even ended up dancing that night with the Queen of Belgium.

*This is how you must do it, people.*

I have never created anything in my life that did not make me feel, at some point or another, like I was the guy who just walked into a fancy ball wearing a homemade lobster costume. But you must stubbornly walk into that room, regardless, and you must hold your head high. You made it; you get to put it out there. Never apologize for it, never explain it away, never be ashamed of it. You did your best with what you knew, and you worked with what you had, in the time that you were given. You were invited,



## BIG MAGIC

and you showed up, and you simply cannot do more than that.

They might throw you out—but then again, they might not. They probably won't throw you out, actually. The ballroom is often more welcoming and supportive than you could ever imagine. Somebody might even think you're brilliant and marvelous. You might end up dancing with royalty.

Or you might just end up having to dance alone in the corner of the castle with your big, ungainly red foam claws waving in the empty air.

That's fine, too. Sometimes it's like that.

What you absolutely must *not* do is turn around and walk out. Otherwise, you will miss the party, and that would be a pity, because—please believe me—we did not come all this great distance, and make all this great effort, only to miss the party at the last moment.

# Divinity