

**THE DANCE**

**THE**

**MOSTLY HONEST**

**OF THE**

**COMPLETELY IRREVERENT**

**POSSIBLE**

**GUIDE**

**TO**

**CREATIVITY**

...

**SCOTT BERKUN**

Early praise for *The Dance of the Possible*:

"You'll find a lot to steal from this short, inspiring guide to being creative. Made me want to get up and make stuff!" - **Austin Kleon**, author of *How To Steal Like An Artist*

"A fun, funny, no-BS guide to finding new ideas and finishing them. Instantly useful."  
- **Ramez Naam**, author of the *Nexus* trilogy

"Concisely debunks all kinds of misconceptions about the creative process in a book that's no-nonsense, fun, and inspiring."  
- **Mason Currey**, author of *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work*

"If I were alive I'd consider endorsing this book, but would likely just tear it apart with my chisel and get back to work."  
- **Michelangelo**, creator of *David*, the Sistine Chapel ceiling (including *The Creation of Adam* fresco) and other works

"This book will undoubtedly increase your abilities to invent, innovate, inspire, and make things that matter. It's fun, it's funny, and it's phenomenally effective." - **Jane McGonigal**, author of *The New York Times* bestsellers *Reality is Broken* and *SuperBetter*

"Highly recommended for anyone whose employment just might depend on the quality of their next idea." - **Todd Henry, author of *The Accidental Creative***

"Creativity is the nature of the mind. It is our birthright and our gift. *The Dance of the Possible*, beautifully, reminds us of how to open it." - **Sunni Brown, co-author of *Gamestorming* and *The Doodle Revolution***

"A fun read and a helpful book! Berkun demystifies creativity in work and play with truth and common sense."  
- **Dan Boyarski, Professor, School of Design, Carnegie Mellon University**

"This new nugget of genius from Scott is the best thing I've read about creativity in a long time."  
- **Dan Roam, author of *The Back of the Napkin* and *Draw To Win***

"They didn't have books in my day but if they did I'd have read this one and asked: why isn't it in Hexameter verse?" - **Homer, author of *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey***

"This short, irreverent-yet-authoritative book from Scott will set you on the right path to get inspired *and* take action on what you create."  
- **Chris Guillebeau, NYT bestselling author of *The \$100 Startup* and host of Side Hustle School**

"...makes the font of creativity something that is right at your door, offering you a cup and inviting you to drink every day."

- **Andrew McMasters, Founder and Artistic Director, Jet City Improv**

"The best short book on creativity yet! Playful, irreverent, insightful, exciting! Full of good advice delivered by example rather than description. Get on with it, Berkun advises, and expeditiously gets you on your way!" - **Bob Root-Bernstein, co-author of *Sparks of Genius*, Professor of Physiology, Michigan State University**

"...demystifies the creative process and makes it easily accessible to anyone. If you're looking for the quickest route from stuck to creative spark, this is the book for you."

- **Dave Gray, author of *Liminal Thinking* and *The Connected Company***

"A spirited and tangibly useful guide to actually getting art done — memorably clear, mercifully artspeak-free, and filled with pithy nuggets of real-world wisdom." - **Ted Orland, co-author of *Art & Fear*.**

"I've been inspired by Scott Berkun's creativity for over a decade. In *Dance of the Possible*, I finally got to see how he does it." - **Jake Knapp, author of *The Wall Street Journal* bestseller *Sprint* and Design Partner at Google Ventures**





# THE DANCE OF THE POSSIBLE

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THE MOSTLY HONEST AND  
COMPLETELY IRREVERENT  
GUIDE TO CREATIVITY

BY SCOTT BERKUN

COVER AND ILLUSTRATIONS  
BY TIM KORDIK

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Acknowledgements

About The Author

*Other fine books by Scott Berkun*  
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*Making Things Happen*

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A TRULY BRIEF  
INTRODUCTION

(THE PAGE BEFORE THE  
OTHER PAGES)

.....

For years I've taught people about ideas and how they work. In lectures and at whiteboards around the world I've experimented with different ways to teach lessons on creative thinking, trying to be more concise and useful each time. I've discovered there isn't that much to know: perhaps a few well-explained insights, just enough to fill a short and worthy book, which is what I hope you find in the pages that follow.



# PART ONE





## 1. THE SOURCE

Where does creativity come from? This sounds like an important question, but the first surprise of this book is that it's not. To prove this, I've listed some possible answers based on the latest neuroscience research on creative thinking. If you guess the right answer to my question, which I doubt you will, I will give you a special and wonderful prize. Choose wisely.

Creativity comes from:

- A) Friendly aliens living underground in the planet Saturn
- B) The tasty filling found inside blueberry doughnuts
- C) An invisible gas that is released only when you finish a nice bottle of wine
- D) All of the above
- E) Some of the above (there are no aliens on Saturn)

Of course these answers are both made up and wrong. I admit that I hoped C was true, but even after many experiments I was never able to stay awake long enough to see the gas, if it exists. I promise I will keep trying, as with the pursuit of all interesting ideas, persistence is required.

Meanwhile, the only possibly correct answer is F) Your mind. This seems obvious, yet when people decide they want to be more creative, they are willing to look just about anywhere except inside themselves. I know from years of study that most of what you need you already have, despite the books, seminars and coaches that claim otherwise. I admit this is a curious way to begin a book about creativity, but I must start here. My central premise is we must first undo the damage of popular misconceptions about ideas and how they work, and in that undoing progress will naturally ensue.

The best place to start is to recognize that creativity, as a subject of study, is a modern invention. Ten thousand years ago people were too busy solving real problems in their lives to worry much about how to label those solutions, or what to call the people who made them. They also made art and music for their own pleasure and didn't worry much about what to call that either. They went and did it because they wanted to. Even the masters of the Renaissance, like Raphael and Donatello, and of the Enlightenment, like Locke and Descartes, didn't talk much about brainstorming exercises or ideation methods. This should make us suspicious about the modern obsession with studying creativity as a thing unto itself.

We can learn three simple rules from our ancestors in this regard:

1. If there's something you want to do, you must simply go and do it.
2. If you want to be better at something, do it more often.
3. If you want to improve faster, ask someone who knows more than you to watch you and give their advice.

Perhaps this seems blindingly obvious, but you are overlooking the fact that right now as you read this you are breaking all of these rules. Currently you are merely reading. Reading is a wonderful way to learn, but it is still a kind of consumption, as while reading you are not creating anything. You won't really be working on your creative skills until you put this book down and go make something. With today's abundance of knowledge from websites and books, we forget that knowing something is not the same as doing something.

The word *create* is a verb. It's an action. Creativity is best thought of in the same way—it's something you can use while involved in an activity, like painting, writing, debating or dancing. If someone tells me they want to be more creative, I will immediately ask, "Creative in doing what?" which often gives them pause. Even if they're clever and say "I want to be more creative at thinking itself!" I will still direct them to a craft, perhaps writing or filmmaking, as they need a medium in order to develop the skills of improving how they think, creatively or otherwise.

Even more insidious than forgotten lessons from our ancestors is how we've burdened ourselves with a strange obsession for labeling things. Is this cool? Is this creative? Is this innovative? Instead of simply putting effort into the skill of making good things, or merely enjoying ourselves regardless of the quality of the outcome, we worry if it meets someone else's subjective

approval. The word *creative* is often used to mean novel, a new idea or way of doing something. But in this very limited use of the word there is a big problem. A person ignorant of Western culture who has never seen a chocolate chip cookie will think it is very creative, while all of us in the West know this is a very old and traditional (yet very tasty) thing. Creativity as novelty is therefore always relative. What one person finds novel might be old news to someone else. This means worrying about what one person calls creative is often a wild goose chase in discerning their tastes, preferences and experiences.

It's far wiser to think about the effect you want an idea to have. If the goal is to make someone laugh, fix their car or increase the revenue of the widgets their company makes, that matters far more than how "creative" an idea is or is not. An idea can be very creative, interesting and inspiring and yet not solve a single problem for anyone. And

the counterpoint is true as well. If you were deathly ill and needed medical care, you wouldn't argue with doctors on the creative merits of their approach. No one has ever said, "Stop this surgery! This will cure me, but it's not creative enough!" We all know in our real lives that creativity is rarely the most important thing, but when it comes to ideas we forget creativity is a means to an end, not often an end unto itself.

If there is a goal of some kind that you are after, something you want creativity to achieve for you, you should know what that is. It could simply be that you want to create something that pleases you. Perhaps you want to write a great play that changes people's minds on a subject you care about. It could be you want to create a billion-dollar company. Whatever it is, it's important to define it. Otherwise, you'll be chasing your subjective tail, and the subjective tails of others, running around like

drunken philosophers endlessly debating the definition of every word instead of getting anything done.

A healthier perspective is that creativity is simply making interesting choices. If this is true, then creativity can be found just about anywhere—in small amounts, perhaps, but it's there nevertheless. There can even be creativity in how consumers, people who don't make anything, consume things. At a fast food restaurant watch how people choose to eat their hamburgers (with the left hand or right? What condiments do they use, or don't? How do they add them?). Or at work, watch how people sign their names or arrange their desks. If you are around children, watch them finger-paint and build worlds in *Minecraft* and you'll see effortless creation without them ever even thinking of the word. Even as bored adults, with lives defined by stressful morning commutes and boring daily routines, we make choices all day



long, and in every one of those choices is the possibility to do something interesting.

Consider the decisions you made today. Did you go to work the usual way, or take a route without being sure where it would lead? When you dressed this morning, did you put on the boring socks and underwear, or the fun ones? Are you reading this book the normal way, or are you lying upside down and holding it above your head? We always have more freedom than we think, we just forget. We spend so much time trying to be efficient that doing anything interesting feels like a waste of time. And in this tendency is another misconception: creativity is rarely efficient. It always involves taking chances and trying things that might work but might not. The question then is: are we willing to spend time to be interesting, to think interesting thoughts and make interesting things?

We all have the power, but perhaps not the willingness.

I encourage you at this point to put on your creative socks, if you have any, before continuing this book. If you don't own any creative socks, take a pair of boring socks you never wear because of their unbearable ordinariness, perhaps they were a gift from a very dull third cousin who lives in the flat and distant lands of Boredomvania, and transform them. With a thick marker or pen write CREATIVE or FUN on each one. This is your first act of creative defiance: make something interesting out of something boring. Is this a transformational, world-changing idea? No. But it is possibly interesting, and that is the best first place to aim for. Many great ideas are really just interesting ones that were highly refined over time by a motivated mind.

If you don't like the very idea of this sock project because it seems silly to you, I say ha. Being silly often leads to

having fun, and having fun means you are more likely to try new things. How do you expect to be more creative if you're not willing to try anything you haven't done before? Not willing to try makes you a victim of the status quo, the greatest killer of potential since the dawn of humanity.

Many books on creativity trivialize the subject by making it all about games and crafty projects, and it'd be fair to complain that with my sock project I am pushing you toward the same trap. However, I ask you to only make this complaint after you've enhanced your socks, not before. This is a good rule for new things, as we instinctively dismiss opportunities in life out of fear of being made uncomfortable, a feeling that comes with growth (which we claim to desire). Lastly, if your objection is the absurdity of having a book dictate that you be "creative" by forcing you to follow a "fun" instruction, I commend you for your sense of autonomy. For

you I suggest using whatever label you wish, perhaps "oppressive pseudo-creative project," but good luck fitting that on your sock.

This chapter began with a question about where creativity comes from, and I gave you a mostly dishonest and silly answer. Here is a more serious one. We get the majority of our creative powers from our subconscious mind.<sup>1</sup> We all know that our nighttime dreams, where we experience wild stories and vivid images, are things we do not consciously choose. They feel like they are happening to us, right until we wake up and realize our own mind created the experience.

There is a similar set of cognitive powers, fueled by our subconscious, that give us ideas while we are awake. We have all had an experience when we

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<sup>1</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013).

were stuck on a problem and decided to stop. Then, hours later, perhaps while doing the laundry or going for a walk, surprise! Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, a solution surfaces in our mind. It feels magical and leads us to think that perhaps, yes, there are aliens from Saturn giving us these ideas. The truth is far simpler: your subconscious mind has been working on the problem for you. Our subconscious minds are better at making associations and connecting diverse ideas than our conscious minds are, which explains the wild, but sometimes insightful, experiences we have in our sleep. There are ways to help this part of your mind work for you, and we will get to them later in this book.

Despite what science tells us about our subconscious, there is a powerful romantic appeal of creativity having an external source, coming from a place, a spirit or a substance outside of us (perhaps even a book). It's attractive be-

cause if creativity is a product, or a possession, then it's something we can just go and purchase like a candy bar or a box of blueberry doughnuts. If this were true, we could escape the challenge of understanding ourselves and how our own individual minds work. Instead of hoping for magical desserts, we should simply become comfortable asking ourselves the following questions:

- In what situations do I feel most creative?
- How can I protect time each day to work on a creative project?
- What are the daily habits of creative people I admire?
- What attitudes do I have that help or hinder me?
- Why do I own so many boring socks?

These questions scare most people because they require us to think, and mostly we don't like to think (though

we like to think that we do). Thinking takes time and requires effort, but I can promise you here, at the close of this opening chapter, that time and effort are required for anything interesting you wish to do with your creative powers. This has been and always will be true.

This book is divided into three parts. Each part has a series of short chapters, some only a page long. Some chapters explain a technique, while others explore, or debunk, a way of thinking. It's a short book by design because if I have written it well, you will soon want to work on something where you can apply your creativity, and the faster I get out of your way, the better. Huzzah! And Tally Ho!





Thanks for reading this sneak peak / sample chapter of *the Dance of the Possible*.

The book will be published and on sale on **March 15<sup>th</sup> 2017**. Until then you can pre-order the book for kindle or paperback by going here:

<http://bit.ly/dance-k>

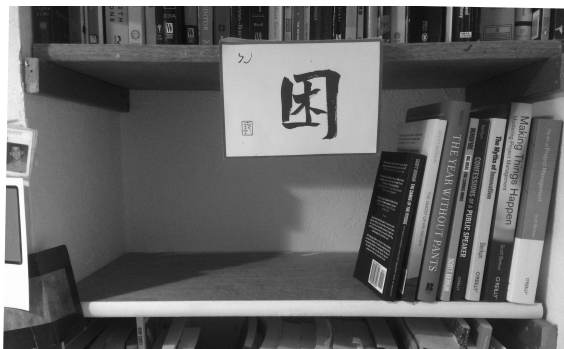
You can also follow the author on various social media platforms by going here:

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Have a nice day.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Scott Berkun is the best-selling author of books on many subjects including *The Myths of Innovation*, *Confessions of a Public Speaker* and *The Year Without Pants*. His work as a writer and public speaker has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Wired Magazine*, *Fast Company*, *Forbes Magazine*, and other media. He has taught creative thinking at the University of Washington and has been a frequent commentator on CNBC, MSNBC, and National Public Radio. His popular essays and entertaining lectures are free at [scottberkun.com](http://scottberkun.com), where you can sign up for a monthly email of all his recent and best work. He tweets at @berkun.