

Inspiration Two Ways

A M Carley

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For a nonfiction book I'm writing, I've been asking that question. My new book offers practices to supercharge your creative flow, ways to harness the creativity tools you already

use, and ideas for applying your big-picture vision to everyday tasks. So you can imagine that inspiration is pretty central to the entire book.

I've come to see that there's more than one kind of inspiration.

Receiving the Cosmic Download

This is the kind we've all seen portrayed in movies, fiction, and other popular culture. It comes from outside ourselves. In this scenario, we're powerless to resist. The upside? Van Gogh's sunflowers and starry night skies. Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. Or so we're led to believe. However, being ravished by inspiration, while certainly dramatic, may not be what I need on a Tuesday afternoon.

For one thing, this kind of inspiration visits now and then – if we're lucky. It may never visit at all, and, if it drops by, may never return. What then? Are we destined to languish as passive vessels, waiting for another dose? That seems a bit boring. Also ineffective. And immensely frustrating.

Also, this external kind of inspiration is likely to show up more often if we make it welcome. A great way to do that is to seek little bits of inspiration on the regular.

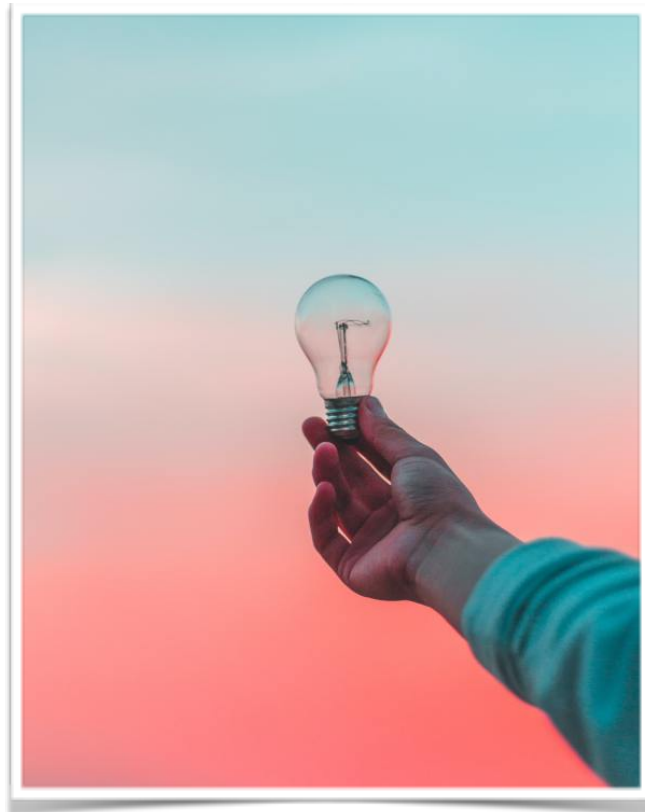
Seeking Inspiration

Can we intentionally go after inspiration? Why not? True, the big kind – when a whoosh of ideas, energy, direction, emotion, and inspiration manifests in your awareness unbidden – is

Roll out the welcome
mat for inspiration

powerful, and wonderful to experience. In fact, everything I'm doing with my new book will make the "whoosh" kind of inspiration want to visit. We're putting out the welcome mat for it.

There's a powerful argument, though, for a more active version, too. The kind that, when you make up your mind to seek it out, is often less big, and also can happen more often. I believe in cultivating this kind, the kind that doesn't need to come from outside yourself. We can invite it in by focusing on something in our environment.



If I'm feeling a little lacking in creative get-up-and-go on that Tuesday afternoon, I can take steps – manageable steps – to go

after some inspiration. Two perennially powerful go-tos are taking time with nature, and practicing focused breathing. After all, the root of the word 'inspiration' is the word for breath. I propose three other small tools here, adaptable even to urban living.

- *Notice Five Things*

I can go for a walk around the block and commit to noticing five things I've never noticed before. The way a roofline meets a downspout. The contrast of a child's yellow toy with the bark of a tree. The sounds of traffic combined with the squeak of a loose road sign in the wind. The cloud formation that looks like layers in a parfait. The smell of burgers and coffee from the diner. Just focusing my senses on my direct experience can act as a palate-cleanser and send me back to work with new ideas and a clear head.

- *Describe to an Alien*

Or I can stay home and change my position, from desk to couch, for instance, and sit there. After a quiet moment, I can choose something to look at closely. Then I can find words, the most accurate words possible – crossouts are permitted – to describe my selected object to an alien, without naming the object or its function, as though my visitor has no frame of reference for this thing. By changing my language, I'm playing 52 pick-up with my assumptions and opening up my imagination. A stapler, a coffee table, or a frying pan will look

different to you after you do this. Your work is likely to look different, as well.

- *Tour the Vault*

A third way I can get inspired is to take a look at things I have stashed away in Evernote. (Needless to say, it doesn't have to be Evernote specifically – that just happens to be the place I habitually tuck bits of information, examples of cool ideas, research, inventions, creative expressions, images, sounds, etc. For you it might be notebooks, scrapbooks, vision boards, a Pinterest page, a closet shelf, etc.) I am always pleasantly surprised at something that's waiting in there. Makes sense, because I use it as a parking lot for things I don't want to make room for in my awareness. And it does its job! When I visit, it's like opening a treasure vault. I recently found great links to pertinent articles on topics of interest for a writing project.



Welcome Them Both

I believe that both forms of inspiration are important, and that it's helpful to welcome them both into your creative life. They seem to get along well.

In fact, the best part, I feel, is that the more I seek it out, the more inspiration seems to be willing to come by for the big 'whoosh' moments. Somehow, it's gotten the message that there's a place for it here.

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Odd juxtapositions can be inspiring. Photo by Diego PH on Unsplash

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