The Power of Dabbling: How Hobbies Make Us More Creative
by Heleo Editors

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James Clear is a productivity expert who uses behavioral science to help nearly half a million newsletter subscribers optimize their habits. He recently sat down with bestselling author Steven Johnson for a conversation on what drives and contextualizes creativity and innovation. Steven is the author of ten books, including Where Good Ideas Come From and, most recently Wonderland, which highlights the influence of wonder and delight on the movements that shape history.

This conversation has been edited and condensed. To view James and Steven’s full conversation, click below:

Steven: So many of the most important innovations and creative ideas that happen in society happen collaboratively and slowly over long periods of time. That is a funny thing because it doesn’t always make for the best story.

James: Right, you lose that [narrative of] creative genius...

Steven: The Eureka moment. [We’d like to think] there was a lone guy battling everyone with a brilliant idea [that] changed the world when it came into his head. But in fact what actually happened is that there were seven people working in different points of time, at different places, each of which had a little piece of the puzzle.

The light bulb is a great example of that. There were about ten people who had most of the ingredients. Edison combined them in the most efficient package, but the idea itself was actually active in the minds of about ten people simultaneously. Trying to write that in a story or make it into TV is complicated because you want to have that one genius presenter.

James: Think about now. I don’t know what the next great innovation will be but let’s say [it will be] something AI-related. There are hundreds of thousands of people working on AI; history will look back on the one person who made the pillar discovery, but in reality it’s probably going to be combination of many small discoveries that will lead to that.

Steven: We have this long history of thinking, “Okay, I want build all of these intellectual property walls around my ideas because I want them to be valuable.’ That is true on some level if you have the perfect idea and you own 100% of it. The problem is the idea will probably be much worse because it’s so protected.
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James: There is an optimal level of connection which you need for ideas to spread. A really good example comes from Jared Diamond about this small island off the coast of Australia. There are over 10,000 people there, but [since] they’re isolated, they lost a lot of technology and innovation. They didn't have that knowledge transfer that you get when societies are connected. You need that within [an organization] too.

Steven: I stumbled across a passage this morning where Diamond was making the point that Europe, from [the] Enlightenment to the Industrial Revolution, had this really interesting mix of nation states with the distinct identities and distinct cultures that were nonetheless close enough to each other that they could share and innovate. [They] had borders but porous ones.

The other thing that I’ve found is how important hobbies are in driving innovative work. One of the things that defines innovative people is they have this tremendous range of hobbies. They’ve got a bunch of big ideas. Darwin has one big idea that’s going to change the world but he’s constantly going off to work with his beetles or barnacles or whatever, and all these different things inevitably end up shaping the main idea or offering new perspectives on it. It’s a bit like having a porous border in your own life.

James: We hear both sides of the story from the experts. They say to focus on one thing, to be maniacal about being deliberate about practicing one thing and becoming a world class master. On the other hand we have [other experts] advocating for trying a bunch of hobbies, experimenting, playing. That’s how you come across new ideas.

Both of those seem true to me so how do we merge those together? Do you have to pick one or the other? Is there some optimal balance between the two?

Steven: The world tries to make you focus. But a lot of what I’ve tried to do with my career is retain the dilettante space. I definitely am focused when I’ve got a book that is defined and I know what’s going into it. But I deliberately map out periods that last for two or three months where I conscientiously do not have an active project. I just spend that time dabbling and reading a weird mix of different books.

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James: Do you find you get good ideas during that time?

Steven: Absolutely. They’re all these inchoate hunches. It’s like an intellectual hobby during that period. You’re just following a bunch of different threads. Because I don’t have a project during that time, it’s really liberating. Your mind wanders across the world.

James: I view it like each perspective is a different set of colored glasses. You get to put on the blue glasses, then the red glasses, and the yellow ones and each of those different lenses through which you look at your problems or the project in your life. You need a varied range of mental frameworks or perspectives of the world and the more readily you can rotate through those, the greater the odds that you’ll find an optimal solution. What are the odds that the one framework that you come across first is the best way to solve any given problem?

Steven: You’ve got that great story about the Helsinki bus station.
James: It’s called the Helsinki bus station theory. The idea is every artist goes through this period where they feel frustrated because they’re producing work [that they feel] doesn’t stand out, that feels derivative. We all have that. We all have our mentors and heroes and people who inspire us to do our work. The metaphor Arno Minkkinen uses is [that] it’s like you’re on a bus line. You have left the station and as you ride the bus route, your work still feels derivative. It doesn’t feel new, you haven’t made it to a new space yet. They feel like everybody tells them, “Oh that kind of reminds me of this person, who’s more famous than you.”

If you stay on the bus long enough, though, you get to a new point on the line. A destination where someone has not reached yet and suddenly your work develops into its own. You gain the whole line back. Now all of your previous stuff is more interesting because you’re the person who created this new unique thing. This was your early work.

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Steven: I did that a lot in college. I deliberately wrote papers using the kind of methodological approach or style of different critics or theorists or historians. It was like, ‘I’m going to try to write like Michel Foucault today.’ I did that with my first few books actually. Slowly over time, by imitating all these other people, by riding a bunch of different bus lines, I figured out how to get to what seems to be my bus line. I’m not sure the neighborhood is really all that nice but it’s my neighborhood.

James: I don’t think you can fast forward or cheat that process. The creative journey requires you to put in that time. As a creator, I wonder if you need some kind of structure. The equivalent of tracking your calories for a bodybuilder. You need some kind of formula in the beginning and then after you’ve done that long enough, you can make it your own and do it naturally and figure out how that evolves for you.

Steven: A couple years ago I went back and saw this indie rock band from my youth. Dinosaur Jr. was big in the 90’s and J Mascis, who’s the lead guitarist and singer, said between songs, “When we first started playing in ’86 we just wanted to sound like Black Sabbath and we could never do it, we just ended up sounding like us. But then that turned out to be interesting and we kind of liked that.”