

Lessons from 7 Years of Brain Pickings by Maria Popova

Reflections on how to keep the center solid as you continue to evolve.

On October 23, 2006, I sent a short email to a few friends at work — one of the four jobs I held while paying my way through college — with the subject line “brain pickings,” announcing my intention to start a weekly digest featuring five stimulating things to learn about each week, from a breakthrough in neuroscience to a timeless piece of poetry. “It should take no more than 4 minutes (hopefully much less) to read,” I promised. This was the inception of Brain Pickings. At the time, I neither planned nor anticipated that this tiny experiment would one day be included in the Library of Congress digital archive of “materials of historical importance” and the few friends would become millions of monthly readers all over the world, ranging from the Dutch high school student who wrote to me this morning to my 77-year-old grandmother in Bulgaria to the person in Wisconsin who mailed me strudel last week. (Thank you!) Above all, I had no idea that in the seven years to follow, this labor of love would become my greatest joy and most profound source of personal growth, my life and my living, my sense of purpose, my center. (For the curious, more on the origin story [here](#).)

Illustration by Maurice Sendak from “I Be You and You Be Me”; by Ruth Krauss, 1954. [Click image for more.](#)

Looking back today on the thousands of hours I’ve spent researching and writing Brain Pickings and the countless collective hours of readership it has germinated — a smile-inducing failure on the four-minute promise — I choke up with gratitude for the privilege of this journey, for its endless rewards of heart, mind and spirit, and for all the choices along the way that made it possible. I’m often asked to offer advice to young people who are just beginning their own voyages of self-discovery, or those reorienting their calling at any stage of life, and though I feel utterly unqualified to give “advice” in that omniscient, universally wise sense the word implies, here are seven things I’ve learned in seven years of making those choices, of integrating “work” and life in such inextricable fusion, and in chronicling this journey of heart, mind and spirit — a journey that took, for whatever blessed and humbling reason, so many others along for the ride. I share these here not because they apply to every life and offer some sort of blueprint to existence, but in the hope that they might benefit your own journey in some small way, bring you closer to your own center, or even simply invite you to reflect on your own sense of purpose.

Illustration from ‘Inside the Rainbow: Russian Children’s Literature 1920-35.’ Click image for more.

Allow yourself the uncomfortable luxury of changing your mind. Cultivate that capacity for “negative capability.” We live in a culture where one of the greatest social disgraces is not having an opinion, so we often form our “opinions” based on superficial impressions or the borrowed ideas of others, without investing the time and thought that cultivating true conviction necessitates. We then go around asserting these donned opinions and clinging to them as anchors to our own reality. It’s enormously disorienting to simply say, “I don’t know.” But it’s infinitely more rewarding to understand than to be right — even if that means changing your mind about a topic, an ideology, or, above all, yourself.

Do nothing for prestige or status or money or approval alone. As Paul Graham observed, “prestige is like a powerful magnet that warps even your beliefs about what you enjoy. It causes you to work not on what you like, but what you’d like to like.” Those extrinsic motivators are fine and can feel life-affirming in the moment, but they ultimately don’t make it thrilling to get up in the morning and gratifying to go to sleep at night — and, in fact, they can often distract and detract from the things that do offer those deeper rewards.

Be generous. Be generous with your time and your resources and with giving credit and, especially, with your words. It’s so much easier to be a critic than a celebrator. Always remember there is a human being on the other end of every exchange and behind every cultural artifact being critiqued. To understand and be understood, those are among life’s greatest gifts, and every interaction is an opportunity to exchange them.

Build pockets of stillness into your life. Meditate. Go for walks. Ride your bike going nowhere in particular. There is a creative purpose todaydreaming, even to boredom. The best ideas come to us when we stop actively trying to coax the muse into manifesting and let the fragments of experience float around our unconscious mind in order to click into new combinations. Without this essential stage of unconscious processing, the entire flow of the creative process is broken.

Most importantly, sleep. Besides being the greatest creative aphrodisiac, sleep also affects our every waking moment, dictates our social rhythm, and even mediates our negative moods. Be as religious and disciplined about your sleep as you are about your work. We tend to wear our ability to get by on little sleep as some sort of badge of honor that validates our work ethic. But what it really is is a profound failure of self-respect and of priorities. What could possibly be more important than your health and your sanity, from which all else springs?

When people tell you who they are, Maya Angelou famously advised, believe them. Just as importantly, however, when people try to tell you who you are, don’t believe them. You are the only custodian of your own integrity, and the assumptions made by those that misunderstand who you are and what you stand for reveal a great deal about them and absolutely nothing about you.

Presence is far more intricate and rewarding an art than productivity. Ours is a culture that measures our worth as human beings by our efficiency, our earnings, our ability to perform this or that. The cult of productivity has its place, but worshipping at its altar daily robs us of the very capacity for joy and wonder that makes life worth living — for, as Annie Dillard memorably put it, “how we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.”

“Expect anything worthwhile to take a long time.” This is borrowed from the wise and wonderful Debbie Millman, for it’s hard to better capture something so fundamental yet so impatiently overlooked in our culture of immediacy. The myth of the overnight success is just that — a myth — as well as a reminder that our present definition of success needs serious retuning. As I’ve reflected elsewhere, the flower doesn’t go from bud to blossom in one spritely burst and yet, as a culture, we’re disinterested in the tedium of the blossoming. But that’s where all the real magic unfolds in the making of one’s character and destiny.

One of Maurice Sendak’s vintage posters celebrating the joy of reading. [Click image for more.](#)

Then, just for good measure, here are seven of my favorite pieces from the past seven years. (Yes, it is exactly like picking your favorite child — so take it with a grain of salt.)