

# THE SPARK AND THE GRIND

SECRETS OF THE WORLD'S  
MOST IMPORTANT CREATORS

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# Creativity is a scorching-hot commodity.

On the corporate level, efforts to court creativity translate to serious money. A recent report showed that total innovation spending of the top 1,000 public companies increased 5.1% to \$680 billion in 2015. But after extensive analysis, the same study found no statistical relationship between the money spent and:

- sales growth
- gross profit growth
- operating profit growth
- operating margin
- net profit growth
- net margin
- market cap growth
- and total shareholder return

In fact, the study's ten most innovative companies based on performance (led by Apple, Google, and Tesla) cumulatively outperformed the top ten spenders by nearly 10%—a trend that has held true for the last six years. Clearly, there is a tangible difference between treating creativity like a health supplement and treating it like a holistic, all-encompassing lifestyle.

Generating creativity takes an effort to make the initial spark. Thomas Edison once locked himself and five coworkers in his lab, where they labored for sixty hours without sleep to finish a working printing machine. This is the first truth you have to understand about creative endeavors: the spark comes to life at the expense of the grind. You will always run into problems when your efforts stop at the initial spark because rarely is the first spark the hottest and most potent. This was clearly true with Edison, who went on to win more than a thousand patents—including the light bulb—by working eighteen-hour days most of his life and famously finding “10,000 ways that won’t work.”

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# Setting the Stage for Inspiration

History loves to trivialize creative output, as it has Isaac Newton's work on gravity with the popular anecdote that it hadn't come to him until that old apple fell on his head. Then, suddenly, the spark glowed to life. The truth is that many Newton biographers—Pulitzer Prize–finalist James Gleick being one of them—aren't convinced the falling apple incident ever happened. There is no mention of it in Newton's own writings. Whether or not it's true doesn't matter, though, because what we do know is that discovering gravity was no serendipitous moment. Newton ignited many sparks for many years. He built a working model of a windmill at age eleven. He discovered the color spectrum and calculus when he was in his mid-twenties. Approximately twenty years later, in his mid-forties, he discovered and published his findings on the three laws of motion, from which all modern physics is derived. And then came gravity.

If Newton stopped with his first spark, he would be known today— if he was at all—as the boy who built a working model of a windmill at age eleven. But he didn't stop there. Isaac Newton was driven to understand how things worked. He immersed himself in all facets of math and science. When the plague hit Cambridge University and a college-aged Newton was forced to return home to the English countryside, he created a small study in his parents' home. There, he pulled out a blank thousand-page journal that he named his “Waste Book,” and then, according to Gleick: “He began filling it with reading notes [which] mutated seamlessly into original research. He set

himself problems; considered them obsessively; calculated answers, and asked new questions. He pushed past the frontier of knowledge (though he did not know this). ... Solitary and almost incommunicado, he became the world's paramount mathematician." Newton filled his Waste Book with more than one million words before he made concrete discoveries. Before he was a famous mathematician, before he understood gravity, Newton would have been called neither an innovator nor a creative. If anything, he would have been called a hard worker who was very curious. Fortunately, it was in this context—diligently stoking the sparks of his imagination—that the results of his efforts caught fire.

The eureka of gravity didn't come from Newton whiteboarding the hypothesis of gravity and then grinding to prove it. The notion of gravity hadn't even crossed his mind in the beginning. The discovery came from Newton chasing a spark of fascination for engineering as a kid, which grew into a passion for math as a young man, which ignited his discovery of the color spectrum, a flame that was fanned into his discovery of calculus, and grew into his discovery of the laws of physics. The flames then burst into an inferno we know as gravity.

What I discovered in my research is that there are seven steps to achieving constant creation, and living an authentically innovative life. Some of them might seem at odds, but in combination, they create the alchemy for success.

# 1 | Trust the Process

Think of an elite athlete like Golden State Warriors superstar Stephen Curry. There are nights when he seems to be playing the game at a higher level than everyone else on the court. He passes without even looking. He shoots without thought. He dribbles with ten hands. We say he's "in the zone." LeBron James tweeted: "@StephenCurry30 needs to stop it man!! He's ridiculous man! Never before seen someone like him in the history of ball!"

Curry's rise to the supernatural is all the more profound when you understand how he actually does it. He was not expected to amount to much at a mere six foot three and 185 pounds. The 2009 NBA Scouting Report on him read as follows:

*Weaknesses: Far below NBA standard in regard to explosiveness and athleticism . . . extremely small for the NBA shooting guard position, and it will likely keep him from being much of a defender at the next level . . . not a natural point guard that an NBA team can rely on to run a team . . . Can overshoot and rush into shots from time to time . . . Will have to adjust to not being a volume shooter which could have an effect on his effectiveness . . . Doesn't like when defenses are too physical with him . . . Not a great finisher around the basket due to his size and physical attributes . . . Makes some silly mistakes at the PG position.*

Truth is, had Curry not learned to trust the creative process and evolve into who he is today, that scouting report would have likely proven accurate. But Curry has become what journalist Drake Baer, in *New York Magazine*, calls “an extreme outlier ... in his ability to process sensory input. ... In simplistic terms, he’s seeing more of the game, allowing him to exploit opponents’ positioning to create shots, find passing lanes, and force turnovers. ... Curry is something of [a] poster boy for an new era in sports, where superior neural circuitry is regarded as just as much of an advantage as a higher vertical or a sweeter jump shot.”

Stephen Curry didn’t get this way overnight. He’s a grinder who saw the need to become a different sort of player, a more cerebral one who can see more opportunities and seize more advantages than his opponents. Then he worked his butt off to get there. According to Curry, that hard work has allowed him to “feel more creative on the floor ... so I can make better moves and have more control over my space out there.” In other words, says Baer, Curry has trained his brain and body to create opportunities out of thin air.

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## 2 | Attach Yourself to the Work

Dr. Bennet Omalu's story is the subject of the book-turned-feature film *Concussion*.

In Jeanne Marie Laskas's game-changing book, she illuminates the epic sort of grinder Dr. Omalu was during his rise to the pivotal position of forensic pathologist-in-training at the Allegheny County coroner's office in Pittsburgh and beyond (he is currently chief medical examiner of San Joaquin County, California). He holds seven degrees, including an MBA, and is board certified to practice four different disciplines of pathology: anatomic, clinical, forensic, and neuropathology.

But what most who knew Dr. Omalu didn't know, until he encountered the body of deceased Pittsburgh Steelers legend Mike Webster in 2002, was that he was also deeply attached to his work. At the time of his life's intersection with the death of Mike Webster, Bennet Omalu was considered, despite all his training to that point, a rookie in the field of forensic neuropathology. Yet his profound, authentic attachment to his grind ignited one of the biggest and most important infernos in the history of sports.

The primary messages about Webster Omalu heard were disheartening to him. He heard that Mike Webster was a Hall of Famer, a nine-time Pro Bowler, a four-time Super Bowl champ, that he known as "Iron Mike," and that he blew his money and fame, made terrible decisions, and eventually threw his life away on drugs. People made fun of him, demeaned him,



derogated him. What a shame, they said, to waste such a career. To waste the opportunities it provided. To waste the love and admiration of an entire city, an entire sport. These merciless comments didn't sit well with the doctor who had been charged to find Webster's cause of death.

As Laskas points out, there was no outside sense of urgency to determine what killed Mike Webster. He'd been found dead of a heart attack in the rundown car he'd been living in, surrounded by bottles of pills, wearing physical signs of drug abuse and thick scars on his thigh from self-inflicted Taser strikes to combat insomnia. Although his death wasn't a suicide, most believed he'd essentially performed his own sad, drawn-out, assisted suicide. Webster had lost his mind in the years before his death, displaying regular signs of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Most assumed this was the result of a depression and drugs spiral.

But Omalu didn't assume. After several days of looking at small slices of Webster's brain under a microscope in the morgue, Omalu placed the former hero's brain in a plastic tub and took it home, where he set up shop on a table in the corner of his living room. There he not only continued cutting slides to study, he further educated himself "on trauma, on football, on helmets, on Alzheimer's disease, on concussions, on impact, on g-force, on protein accumulation, on dementia pugilistica. It became for him a calling. He was after all a spiritual man, and he came to know Mike Webster in the most personal way.

Omalu's attachment to his work gave him the psychological, physical, and spiritual resolve to overcome any adversity along the way, which in Omalu's case spanned the full spectrum from detractors to death threats. And when a person is committed to a craft come hell or high water, sparks will continue to fly. Eventually they will start a blaze.

When who you are comes through in what you produce, the production no longer feels like work. Even when the hours are long.

This is what drove—and drives to this day—Dr. Bennet Omalu. Had he not attached himself to his work, it is unlikely he would have seen his highly disruptive brainchild through. It's also unlikely the entire sports world would now be working toward protecting millions of athletes from head injuries that can destroy their lives.

It took several weeks for Dr. Omalu to grind out the spark that got the fire burning in this field, but when he did, his resolve would not allow it to be snuffed out. When Omalu finally discovered in Webster's 50-year-old brain the signs that best compared to advanced Alzheimer's in a ninety-year-old patient, he immediately showed the slides to his well-known supervisor Cyril Wecht and to a handful of neuroscientists at the University of Pittsburgh. They concurred that what they were looking at was a new disease that no one had seen or documented before. Dr. Omalu had to name it, they said. He called it chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) and then wrote an

article on his findings titled “Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy in a National Football League Player.” Omalu sent it to the most respected neurology journal to be published. He expected excitement from the NFL doctors for whom he felt he had done a great service in discovering this terrible disease, which they could now work to prevent.

But the NFL doctors deemed his report false and called for its retraction. It was not retracted. But it wouldn't have mattered either way. This was now part of Omalu as much as it was of Mike Webster. In fact, this was all his to see through. He continued grinding, undaunted by the adversity, ignited by passion and purpose.

If you've seen the film, you know that Dr. Omalu was pressured to back down from his discovery. He didn't. In fact, he sparked more proof from the premature deaths of three more NFL players. When former NFL Players Association executive Dave Duerson took his own life in February 2011 due to growing cognitive issues, admitting in his suicide note that Omalu was right, Omalu's adversaries came under heated scrutiny to reckon with his discoveries. Three months later, neurologists at Boston University confirmed that Duerson suffered from CTE.

That small spark that arose from Omalu's deep-seated work still burns bright today. The NFL is now working alongside doctors, researchers, and engineers to construct the right resolutions

for early diagnosis, proper treatment, and ultimately the mitigation of traumatic head injuries in the game of football and beyond.

Meanwhile, Omalu continues his hands-on work with autopsies, speaking as an advocate for the deceased—grinding out his calling. It is perhaps fitting that his surname, Omalu, is shortened from Onyemalukwube, which translates: If you know, come forth and speak. His story is an inspiring demonstration to all of us that it is completely possible to have a nontraditionally creative job and still do highly creative, highly influential work.

*“When who you are comes through in what you produce, the production no longer feels like work. Even when the hours are long.”*

### 3 | Keep Your Day Job

Popular social media strategist Amy Jo Martin worked for the NBA's Phoenix Suns franchise as the director of digital media from 2006 to 2008, when the social media frontier was entirely new ground.

Amy Jo's job, as explicitly stated by the Suns' top brass, was to promote the team's brand, not the players' personal brands. (This sounds almost silly now, knowing how critical superstars are to their teams' brands, but, again, it was a new world back then). Of course, Amy Jo was a renegade—as she explains in her book about this experience, *Renegades Write the Rules*—who didn't listen too well to the management. That's not entirely true, though; Amy Jo listened enough to keep her job. But the more the Suns' players asked her for help, the more she helped—behind the scenes.

She was one of the early pioneers who saw the immense value that social media could provide in humanizing a big corporate brand for its consumer audience. She saw that when Suns' superstars like Shaquille O'Neal and Steve Nash connected with fans in an authentic and personal way, this could only boost the brand of the Phoenix Suns. She was right, though the Suns' brass didn't see it at that time. But instead of resenting her bosses' mandate, she ground hard for nearly two years to prove them wrong for their own benefit, both above ground through creations like the

first ever tweet-up, and below their radar by implementing clever strategies for the players to grow their personal brands.

In that context, one particular spark kept flying: the players' brands were more potent than the corporate brand because they were able to build a more natural person-to-person interaction. Keep in mind, this was in 2007 and 2008. Few were the possibilities of social media communities. But Amy Jo did and she leaned into the idea long enough to prove its fire would burn hot. Unfortunately for the Suns, they would not reap the benefits.

When Amy Jo's hand was slapped once again for helping Shaquille strategize ways to connect with and entertain what was then a hundred thousand followers, she knew it was time to start building out her idea full time. She put in her notice with the Suns and took on Shaq as her first client. Other clients came quickly, and in a matter of eighteen months she'd already fanned the initial spark into a blaze called Digital Royalty with individual clients like Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson and major corporate clients like Nike, Hilton Worldwide, and the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). Approximately four years later, Amy Jo sold off the core intellectual property of Digital Royalty for a large sum. Still in her thirties, she's now stoking new sparks and watching closely to see which ones burn hot.

By grinding your present circumstances like Amy Jo did, you will create sparks you never imagined before. New frontiers will open up that you could not have brainstormed if you spent a month with a whiteboard. It's far easier to create sparks from the roles you're already in and the realities you know than trying to create sparks for roles you don't know firsthand and realities you don't understand.

Grind where you are, with what you have. This is where your best sparks often lie. Noticing them requires a combination of intellect and intuition. This is why you must be fully there—head and heart both in it.

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## 4 | Embrace a Routine

When he was in office, former president Barak Obama routinely wore suits in the same two colors.

“You’ll see I wear only gray or blue suits,” Obama told Michael Lewis in a 2012 article for Vanity Fair. “I’m trying to pare down decisions. I don’t want to make decisions about what I’m eating or wearing. Because I have too many other decisions to make. You need to focus your decision-making energy. You need to routinize yourself. . . . You can’t be going through the day distracted by trivia.”

But beware that you can take this too far. Obama confessed to Lewis that the level to which he had to be “routinized” as the president of the United States is unnatural. With too much under routine, “You can’t wander around. It’s much harder to be surprised. You don’t have those moments of serendipity.”

When your creative urge begins to diminish, when you no longer have the space to wander both mentally and physically, you’ve taken your routine too far, spread it too broadly. Back off and build in some more margin. But no matter how much tinkering it takes to find your groove, don’t give up. With no routine at all, you will never touch your creative potential.



On one hand, creativity can touch anything in our lives. But the reality is that some of us don't care to dress more creatively, for instance (Steve Jobs was a prime example). But we all have roles and activities in our lives that really matter, and those are different for everyone. When I say you must establish your routine, I am specifically talking about freeing up space to be more creative in the areas of your life that matter most. That requires two parts: streamlining activities that matter less (perhaps like your clothing), and routinizing activities in your life that matter most, so that you have space and time to grow, to spark and grind. There's a very simple reason we tend to have big ideas on vacation.

Much of what isn't significant is removed. And what is significant is with us full time. In effect, vacations impose a new routine on us that opens us up to great possibilities in the areas that matter most. In our hearts, we know what these are. When we get these right and experience the rewards of creativity there, new frontiers are clearer rather than capricious, and we can have confidence entering them. In truth, our priorities are always frontiers each day, filled with mystery, possibility, and surprising joy. We just must free up time to enter them.

It's not easy at first, but few efforts are more worth your energy.

## 5 | Defamiliarize the Ordinary

Dr. Paul Buczynsky spent the first decade of his career working in the emergency room at Athens Regional Hospital in the bustling college town of Athens, Georgia. There, he proved to be a talented and compassionate physician, a gift to his emergency room patients, and an inspiration to his coworkers. He didn't set out just to know names and medical histories. He wanted to know the hearts of his patients. And so he did, especially those he saw often: the young woman fighting a drug addiction so she could give her two kids a better life; the middle-aged man who wasn't fluent in English and struggled to find steady work but wanted desperately to make a good life for himself and his wife; the homeless man in his sixties who hoped aloud that his children would one day forgive him.

Before long it became clear that Dr. Buczynsky was an outlier in a segment of the medical profession that rarely finds time to be anything but clinical. No matter what sent you to the hospital in Athens, Georgia, Dr. Buczynsky was who you hoped to see when you arrived. That sort of reputation was eventually impossible to ignore, and by his midthirties, he was promoted to the head of the ER.

The story could end there and we could mine a nice lesson from how a doctor used an uncommon level of compassion to re-create a typically precise and steely environment. But that's not where Dr. Buczynsky's story ends.

Doctors in the ER often get a daily glimpse into the socioeconomic struggles of their cities: drugs, poverty, prostitution, abuse, to name only a few. Some doctors ignore the deeper problems and focus on what they know, the work they were trained to do—one suture, one surgery, one diagnosis at a time. Other doctors lament over what they see to their colleagues and spouses, but feel helpless to make any real difference. It's just not their line of work. So they, too, focus on doing the work they've been trained to do.

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Dr. Buczynsky doesn't think this way. When he sees a problem, he seeks a solution—even if it's beyond what he has been trained to do. When he realized how many of his repeat patients were not drug addicts or alcoholics but rather good people trying to make ends meet who simply couldn't afford health insurance, a spark ignited.

He knew these patients were not trying to be a drain on the system; they were usually embarrassed when their visit to the ER ended up being a minor issue. But what else could they do? They couldn't afford to see a doctor for preventative checkups or a diagnosis. They couldn't visit a specialist to receive prescriptions for medicine that would heal them much quicker. So they often did nothing, hoping a sickness or injury or strange feeling would just pass. When it didn't they did what most of us would do—they sought out the only doctor they could afford—the ER doctor who by law would treat them even if they had no money.

Knowing all this—and knowing the hearts of many of these patients, who were trying to do well in life—Dr. Buczynsky asked himself: Was there any way to dignify these well-meaning patients with regular, preventative care so they didn't have to use the ER like a family doctor?

As he thought about this question, it became clearer and clearer that the answer was no, at least not in the current environment in which he worked. But when he considered another environment unfamiliar to him at the time—private practice—the answer leaned toward yes.

It would take nearly two years, several volunteers, and the financial commitment of many local business owners and, yes, fellow physicians who caught the doctor's vision, but approximately fourteen years after taking the Hippocratic oath, Dr. Buczynsky put in his notice at Athens Regional Hospital and took a 40 percent pay cut to assume the role of director and head physician of his brainchild, the Mercy Health Center, a one-of-a-kind health services provider where patients are treated with preventative measures and for health issues as they arise—just as they would be in a family doctor's office. And they are asked only to pay what they can.

In a familiar environment, Dr. Buczynsky sought the unfamiliar and discovered the spark of a creation that is changing the lives of hundreds of good people in a typically marginalized population.

*“Our priorities are always frontiers each day, filled with mystery, possibility, and surprising joy.”*

## 6 | Stay Foolish

In his book *How Bad Do You Want It?* author Matt Fitzgerald describes a natural phenomenon that occurs when we are subjected to a scenario, often an adverse one, that requires us to relearn something from scratch—essentially, when we are subjected to becoming an amateur again. Fitzgerald calls the phenomenon the workaround effect.

He tells the story of Django Reinhardt, the legendary jazz player who was a virtuoso by the time he was eighteen years old. Later, a house fire badly burned the middle and ring fingers of his fret hand, leaving them paralyzed. He was forced to either put down his guitar and learn something else or learn how to play guitar all over again with eight fingers instead of ten. He chose the latter. The result was a new solo style that the music world called hot jazz. Critics judged Reinhardt's new style better than his original one. It was this style that he used to become a legend.

“The workaround effect comes in several flavors,” explains Fitzgerald. “The flavor we’re discussing here is known to scientists as neuroplasticity. The brain is highly plastic: It has almost unlimited ability to reorganize itself in response to roadblocks affecting its normal operations. For example, the brain of someone who loses her sight rewires itself in ways that sharpen the other senses.”

## 7 | Fall in Love

“Even on her deathbed,” writes Barbara Goldsmith of Madame Curie, “Marie had insisted that a dose of fresh air might be all that was needed to help her recover. With the persistence that had allowed her to perform seemingly impossible tasks, Marie Curie never acknowledged that her beloved radium might have betrayed her.”

Goldsmith points out that in Curie’s autobiography, the great scientist admitted that radiation had damaged her health only slightly, in a minor way. Even when she was a little older and constantly bothered by humming in her ears and deteriorating eyesight, in a letter to a friend she only acknowledged, “Perhaps radium has something to do with these troubles, but it cannot be affirmed with certainty.”

Madame Curie, for all intents and purposes, was very protective of her work. And while the knowledge of radiation in the early 1900s had not, as she insisted, yet affirmed the direct link between exposure and major health problems, Curie would likely not have admitted it if such were the case. And it was the case come 1925, explains Goldsmith. “At wooden tables in the U.S. Radium Corporation factory in New Jersey a row of young women sat painting luminous numbers on watch dials, diligently licking their brushes to bring them to a fine point. The paint contained only one part radium per six-hundred thousand parts of inert substances, yet within

three years, fifteen young women perished as radium poisoning destroyed their jaws and bone marrow.”

History now knows with certainty that it was exposure to radiation that killed not only Madame Curie, but her daughter Irène and son-in-law Frédéric, who won the Curie family’s third Nobel Prize. How could they not have seen it? asks Goldsmith. “The answer, I believe, was love,” she answers. “It prevented Marie and Pierre from seeing radium with the same cold, scientific eye they brought to their other work. Even as they warned of the dangers of radium exposure, at their bedside the Curies had kept a vial of radium salts to observe its beautiful glow before falling asleep. Marie referred to radium as ‘my child.’”

Love drives us to make great sacrifices. Personal sacrifices. Even the ultimate sacrifice.

*“ Know yourself and know what is important to you.  
Do what you have to do to innovate and elevate those priorities.  
Fight to establish and keep your creative routine.  
It is the one undercurrent that will amplify all else you do.*

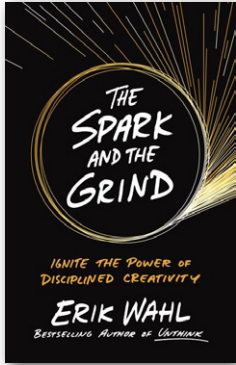


## Find What Works for You

The importance lies not in what your routine involves but in whether it's effective. Vogue editor in chief Anna Wintour starts her day with a 5:45 A.M. tennis match. Disney CEO Robert Iger wakes at 4:30 A.M. to clear his head before heading off to another creative day; this head-clearing involves exercise, reading the papers, surfing the Web, and watching a little TV. Oprah sits in stillness for twenty minutes twice a day. Padmasree Warrior, the chief technology and strategy officer of Cisco Systems, who oversees tens of thousands of employees, meditates daily and spends her Saturdays completely unplugged.

Know yourself and know what is important to you. Do what you have to do to innovate and elevate those priorities. Fight to establish and keep your creative routine. It is the one undercurrent that will amplify all else you do. It will push and pull you around at first, but once you get used to it, you won't feel the tugs. This is the promise of a routine that drives meaningful sparks in your life. Don't wait to be in the mood. "Being in the mood to write, like being in the mood to make love, is a luxury that isn't necessary in a long-term relationship," writes Julia Cameron. "Just as the first caress can lead to a change of heart, the first sentence, however tentative and awkward, can lead to a desire to go just a little further." **Seek those first caresses. Discover them, embrace them and then you will come to expect them.** 📖

# Info



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | Erik Wahl is an artist, author, and entrepreneur. He is internationally recognized as a thought provoking graffiti artist and one of the most sought-after speakers on the corporate lecture circuit. He lives in Southern California with his wife, Tasha, and their three sons.

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