

# IMAGINATION PRACTICES

Excerpted from *Imagination First: Unlocking the Power of Possibility* (Liu, E., and Noppe-Brandon, S., 2009) – [click here](#) to learn more about the book

practice 1

## MAKE MIST

Ready, get still, go

We like to think that life is action – that living is moving, that animation is what generates anima. But in fact stillness is a most fertile breeding ground for ideas. The problem is, modern life is almost completely free of stillness.

Laurie Coltrin, one of the Imagineers who create the attractions at Disney theme parks, places similar faith in stillness. Her job is to bring crazy ideas to life... and how she starts is by going to what she calls “the misty place.” She sets her alarm early and stays in bed half-awake, letting strange and loosely formed ways of seeing things float past.

Sometimes, to be sure, imagination is sparked by frenzy. But frenzy is generally not a sustainable life strategy. ***Far more fruitful is the practice of simple stillness.***

- Quiet the mind
- Unplug
- Do one thing at a time
- Then do no thing at a time

practice 4

## MAKE WAY FOR AWE

Nurture humility and the wonder that comes with it

There is nothing like knowing it all to kill the imagination. **When we become expert, or think we have, we get the benefits of intellectual shortcuts and far greater processing efficiency – but we suffer the cost of closed-mindedness.** Having seen it all, we stop looking. Having been there, we stop going. Having done that, we stop doing. **To rekindle the imagination we would do well to rediscover the sense of awe – of wonder** – that every child comes equipped with and that seems to seep out along the trip to adulthood.

**How might we re-expose ourselves to wonder?** There are many paths available. **Intentionally explore** topics or places that are completely unfamiliar to you. Read a magazine or listen to a podcast about a subject that’s foreign to you. Take a walk and look around and notice what you often zip right by on your way to somewhere more important.

John Seely Brown, former head of Xerox PARC lab, describes a “golden triangle” of inspiration, imagination, and innovation. At the heart of the triangle is awe. **“Awe drives imagination,”** he says. “What does it mean to be able to hold the world in awe?” asks Seely Brown.

That’s for you to know... and for you to find out.

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## practice 5

### REINVENT THE WHEEL

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#### Be willing to give back the givens

Some things we take to be laws of nature, or works of mankind long ago perfected. Take the wheel. If ever there was a cliché about creative work, it is that we should at all costs avoid “reinventing the wheel.”

But at MIT’s Media Lab, a team of researchers is doing just that. Literally. These scientists have designed automobile prototypes in which all wheels operate independently. Will it work? Will we see these cars anytime soon? Who knows. But the audacity of the endeavor is thrilling—both for the what of it and for the how.

**What we know often constrains our ability to imagine what we don’t know.** Psychologist Thomas Ward calls this a “structuring effect.” Whenever we find ourselves bumping up against the “structuring effects” of our own past experience, two moves should come to mind: consider the wider environment and, once there, treat nothing as sacred.

Our instinct to **solve problems** is to confine and contain them. But there are times when **expanding the frame enables you to be less attached to what had seemed preordained or perfected—the givens—in the smaller frame.** With detachment, a simple insight emerges – most givens can be given back. And perhaps even more exciting, you get to decide which ones to keep.

## practice 6

### THINK INSIDE THE BOX

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#### Make greedy, grateful use of limits

In our culture today, everyone is told to think outside the box. The real question that arises when we hear this advice is, “**What’s wrong with the box?**”

**It turns out that boxes – that is, limitations – can be incredible prompts to imagination.** Limits beget inventiveness. Creativity loves constraints. We can also impose artificial constraints on ourselves as a way of jump-starting our imagination.

One technique that’s useful when generating potential solutions to a challenge is called **Diminishing Options.** **When you identify what seems to be a good option, you remove it from the list, thereby forcing yourself to dig deeper and look for novel solutions.** A door is the easy, obvious way to exit a room, but what if you can’t use the door? Usually, it’s only then that you start to look at the windows, the ceiling, or the HVAC ducts as potential routes.

**The critical factor is intention.** Our lives are boxed in by limitations, material and attitudinal, that we inherit or create. It takes intentional practice to see those limitations not merely as something to tolerate but as the source of new invention. When we can convert scarcity into an asset, we are not just playing well. We are living well.

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### practice 9

## RENEW YOUR NARRATIVE

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### Ask whether your story still serves you

What is identity but a nested set of narratives? There is the narrative of who you are as an individual, the narrative of who you are in family, of your tribe or group, of what you are capable of doing—or not.

We are predisposed to make sense by making narratives. With story, we have a sense of place and calling. Without story, life feels like chaos. Sometimes it can serve us well. But sometimes our need for narrative can imprison us.

**Few things impede the flow of imagination like dead narratives – narratives that block our ability to grow, that have outlived their usefulness.** When that happens, as the dream expert Robert Moss says, “We bind ourselves to the wheel of repetition, because we refuse to reimagine our situation.”

The first thing to do, then, is to **become aware of our narratives**, collective and individual. Then you must **ask yourself: Is this story I tell confining me? Is it allowing me or my circle to live at our fullest potential? If it is not, then a new mindset is in order.** A remodel of your narrative, a reconstruction of that house of mind.

If you can build it, then you can also rebuild it.

### practice 23

## ROUTINIZE RANDOMNESS

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### Regularly rinse out expectations

Occasionally you’ll see a game going around on Facebook called “What’s on Page 56?” Here are the rules:

- Grab the book nearest you. Not your favorite/coolest. The CLOSEST. Right now.
- Turn to page 56.
- Find the fifth sentence.
- Post that sentence along with these instructions.

And that’s it. All you have to do is be willing to follow this routine. What emerges is something totally random. Sometimes the results are interesting, sometimes they’re not. Every time it makes you think.

**Planning for surprise is not a method. It’s a mindset.**

Expectations are one of the great enemies of imagination. Randomness is disorienting because it scrambles the sequence of expectation. We don’t know what should come next. When that happens, our minds open. **Disorientation is good for the imagination.**

**So embrace the randomness when it comes. And make it a habit – a routine, even – of making some randomness of your own.**

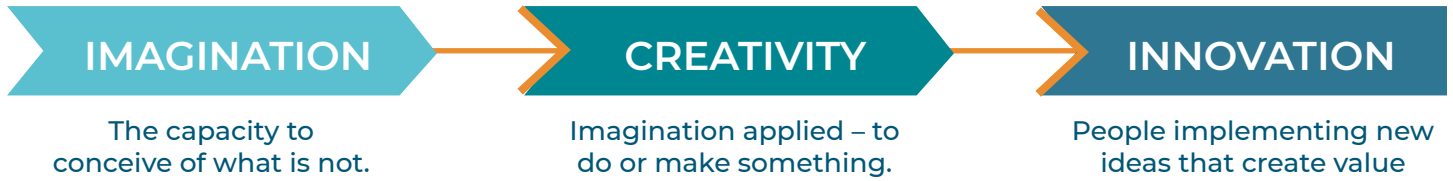
# IMAGINATION ROUTINE

Like a muscle, it can be developed with practice.



## Faster Glass

imagine better ← innovate faster



WEEK		
MONDAY	TUESDAY	
WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	
FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY