

practice 1

Make Mist

Ready, get still, go

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e 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. Our hyperkinetic culture tries to colonize it, treating stillness as just one more flavor of stimulation to choose from or one more task to accomplish. But making it a “to do” doesn’t do it; that only tightens the grip of our control-freak multitasking minds.

Whole Foods founder and CEO John Mackey, who conceived of the idea of an organic grocery chain, says, “Scheduling is the enemy of imagination.” As often as possible, in good quarters or bad, he will clear his calendar for days at a time. During those blank hours, he reads. He thinks. He gets lost in science fiction, economic

theory, comic books. He notices where resistance arises, where inspiration flares. He's not *trying*, Mackey insists, to cultivate imagination. There's no plan. He merely trusts that letting things unfold nonlinearly is the best approach to growth that is enduring and, well, organic.

Laurie Coltrin, one of the Imagineers who create the attractions at Disney theme parks, places similar faith in stillness. A freak snowstorm in Florida as the premise for a ski ride at Disney World? Sure! Her job is to bring that crazy idea to life, and to translate it into a masterwork of space and place. 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. As the mist of these dawning dreams moves in, she notices what it curls around and rises above. The mist tells its own tale.

David Gonzalez, master storyteller, knows this well. Gonzalez creates wildly inventive multimedia monologues for the stage. His acclaimed productions can have multiple moving parts: big bands, irresistible dance sequences, primordial myths brought to life with gesture and elliptical suggestion. It takes a great deal of energy for Gonzalez to make the parts fit and flow onstage. But before he does any of this—the harvesting, the mixing, the matching, the orchestrating, the revising, the improvising—he first makes a conscious effort to meditate in solitude. He shuts up, and allows what comes



to come. He forgives what won't come if it won't. He knows he's a story whisperer before he's a story teller.

What these three share is trust: in silence, in themselves, and in the logic of magical thinking. 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. (A BlackBerry has no icon for imagination.) Do one thing at a time. Then do no thing at a time.



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