

The 7 vices of highly creative people

If you go through life free of bad habits, you won't live forever, but it will feel like it.

By D.A. Blyler

February 09, 2000 | It all starts one quiet afternoon at the brew-pub. I'm sitting with my associate Bobby, enjoying a pint of the house ale, when Stephen Covey (author of "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People") suddenly appears on the bar television. I can't quite describe the level of annoyance that the bald business guru brings to a room of gentle drinkers, trying to enjoy themselves while the rest of the populace is at work, but a sudden wail from a man in the far corner, similar to that of a small dog yanked forcefully by the tail, alerts everyone that something is terribly wrong. In a matter of moments all eyes are fixed in distress upon the television.

Soon customers with clenched fists start to share horror stories of managers who forced Covey's book to them. And of group leaders who scurried around the office pasting up signs like: "Synergy!" or "Be Proactive!" or "What would Covey do in your situation?" Rage and desperation had finally forced our fellow drinkers to leave their professions and find solace in the thick, rich ales fermented by the pub's microbrewery.

Bobby and I are amazed. Having spent 10 years carving out lives as professional grad students, we've been oblivious to the rising tide of worker despair. I remember seeing a Covey infomercial several months back; it seemed harmless enough. Watching employees become automatons spouting Covey's catch phrases at every opportunity was the funniest thing I had seen on television in quite a while. But now, as the man in the corner begins weeping, Bobby and I realize that larger issues are at hand.

Covey is no business guru, but rather the result of a world gone awry -- the world of work made worthless. Gone are the large expense accounts. Gone are the smoke breaks and three martini lunches. Gone are the innocent office flirtations. Good lord, who would want to work in an environment like that?

I slam my fist on the table. "We need a book about the 7 Vices of Highly Creative People before the whole country ends up in a straitjacket!" Bobby agrees enthusiastically, grabs a stack of napkins and begins writing. All the years we've spent studying history and literature are finally paying off. It isn't easy. But after six hours and five pitchers we finish the job. The pub closes so we gather the napkins and head for a late-night bar to celebrate. It isn't quite a book, but what the hell. We have better things to do than write another damn self-help book.

Vice one: Be a drinker

Winston Churchill, a great fan of the martini, once said that it must always be remembered that he has taken more out of alcohol than alcohol has taken out of him. For

Churchill, like many other great drinkers, alcohol was a tool used to feed creativity and social discourse. For others, like Ernest Hemingway, alcohol was a way to place the mind on a different plane after writing all day at a desk. This is what old Papa had to say:

I have drunk since I was 15 and few things have given me more pleasure. When you work all day with your head and know you must again work the next day, what else can change your ideas and make them run on a different plane like whiskey?

Some people might say that this is to use alcohol as a crutch, but that's always been the case. Mark Twain, who drank from morning until night, would periodically abstain from drink and smoke just to silence the critics who said he was a slave to his vices. And on his feistier days, he would give them a severe tongue-lashing. "You can't get to old age by another man's road!" he'd scream. "My vices protect me but they would assassinate you!" His critics would then shuffle away to their [12-step programs](#) and the organizing of their sock drawers.

To be a drinker means, of course, to be social. Sure, it's all right to drink by oneself on occasion. But because the highly creative live so often in the private world of ideas, they also need to mingle with their friends at a good party. That's why F. Scott Fitzgerald threw his fantastic "Gatsbyesque" parties on Long Island, inviting such other besotted artists as Gloria Swanson, Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos and Dorothy Parker. Remember, though, that when entertaining the highly creative some ground rules need to be set. Fitzgerald's were posted at the entrance to his home in Great Neck:

Visitors are requested not to break down doors in search of liquor, even when authorized to do so by the host and hostess ... Weekend guests are respectfully notified that the invitation to stay over Monday issued by the host-hostess during the small hours of Sunday morning must not be taken seriously.

It's always good to think ahead.

Lastly, something should be said for the occasional weekend bender, that is as long as your head is in the right place. If a person is suppressing problems or going through severe emotional distress, alcohol can bring out bad tendencies ... like singing karaoke. But if you're secure with yourself, the occasional bender can be a rather helpful mystical experience. As Henry James once wrote, "Sobriety diminishes, discriminates and says no, while drunkenness expands, unites and says yes!"

Vice Two: Begin with a Smoke

In today's climate, [smoking](#) might be the most unpopular of all the vices. To say that the furor over its ill effects has reached irrational levels is an understatement. Let's accept the guidance of journalist Fletcher Knebel, who keenly observed as far back as 1961 that smoking is the leading cause of statistics. The fact is that most [people who smoke](#) don't die of lung cancer. But all people who don't smoke do die of something. Marlene Dietrich, who had her own special love of cigarettes, put it into proper perspective:

People who quit smoking think that they have made a pact with the devil and believe they will never die. In reality they die from other illnesses: intestinal cancer, stomach cancer, cancer of the pancreas. Cancer forever gropes around for further victims.

So let's not place blame on the lowly cigarette for the infirmities of the world. Yes, smoking has its risks. So does getting out of bed in the morning. But a good smoke is often a lovely affair worth pursuing.

Take the great Spanish filmmaker Luis Buuel, an ardent lover of tobacco and life's pleasures. He elevated cigarettes to the level of poetry:

If alcohol is queen, then tobacco is her consort. It's a fond companion for all occasions, a loyal friend through fair weather and foul. People smoke to celebrate a happy moment or hide a bitter regret. I love to touch the pack in my pocket, open it, savor the feel of the cigarette between my fingers, the paper on my lips, the taste of tobacco on my tongue. I love to watch the flame spurt up, love to watch it come closer and closer, filling me with its warmth.

Makes you want to light one up right now, doesn't it?

Smoking has often been linked with creative genius. For example, French philosopher Albert Camus is well known to have savored his smokes though his lungs were withered by tuberculosis. And who can imagine Albert Einstein without his pipe, George Burns without his cigar or Jackson Pollock without a cigarette dangling from his lips? Though a stimulant, smoking has a relaxing influence and allows the mind to empty itself, enabling new thoughts to enter. Following the wisps of smoke as they leave one's mouth might actually be thought of as a creative exercise or, at the very least, as Oscar Wilde once observed, smoking a cigarette is "a perfect pleasure, because they are exquisite and leave one unsatisfied."

Vice Three: Put Gambling First

Gambling is at the heart of every worthwhile accomplishment in life. Consequently, vice three is essential for the success of your creativity. Instinctively, the highly creative person knows that nothing matters except the throw of the dice. As the French say, "There are two great pleasures in gambling: that of winning and that of losing." Or, in the words of Mark Twain, "There are two times in a man's life when he should [gamble]: when he can't afford it and when he can." These are vital lessons.

The world is full of stories of highly creative people whose success was based on the big gamble. A young Steven Spielberg sneaks into a Hollywood film studio, sets up an office and proceeds to act like an employee, thus beginning the most lucrative directorial career in history. Thirty-year-old Henry Miller moves to Paris with little money and no prospects, determined to become the most talked-about American novelist of his generation, and does. Hugh Hefner boldly walks into the offices of John Baumgarth and

acquires the rights to reproduce the photograph of a nude [Marilyn Monroe](#), a little known starlet, for his yet-to-be-published magazine.

Certainly, there are horrifying stories of those who gambled and lost heavily, whose compulsive involvement in games of chance, often played out in the arena of big business, nearly ruined them and scores of others. But it's not until the end of life that we truly know what we've won or lost. French philosopher Denis Diderot summed it up eloquently:

The world is the house of the strong. I shall not know until the end what I have lost or won in this place, in this vast gambling den where I have spent more than 60 years, dicebox in hand, shaking the dice.

Vice Four: Think Oysters

The hysteria concerning eating habits has nearly reached the grotesque levels granted smoking. Fat or non-fat? Cholesterol free? Salt or no salt? Most eaters, as long as they exercise a modicum of restraint, don't have to worry about dying from their diet. And all those critics who have tried to convince us that food is poison should be taken behind the shed and whipped with a massive slice of uncooked bacon.

Let us bow to the wisdom of the marvelous chef [Julia Child](#), now an octogenarian. When asked about so-called health foods and non-fat products, she gnashed her teeth and stated emphatically that she never would buy such crap, that they have nothing to do with the enjoyment of life.

Make no mistake, the highly creative do enjoy life. Sure, sometimes there is a suicide among the group, and many are often prone to fits of depression. But when they finally decide to stop wallowing in their suffering, they embrace life with passion. And when it comes to food, they want to eat well, and eat properly. In other words, foie gras, fresh asparagus and filet mignon will always win out over a plate of french fries and greasy burgers. At least it will for those who are truly creative and whose imaginations permeate their lifestyles as well as their art. Something that sadly can't be said of lesser creatives -- Rosie O'Donnell and Tom Arnold come to mind.

Certain foods are frequently associated with highly creative people. None more so than the oyster. The inspiration of this shellfish can be traced throughout the canon of English literature. From Geoffrey Chaucer to George Bernard Shaw, it reaches its zenith with a tribute by Saki, who wrote, "The oyster is more beautiful than any religion, nothing in Buddhism or Christianity matches its sympathetic unselfishness."

I'm not sure I would describe them in such exalted terms, but I do know I have had more invigorating conversations with writers and painters over a plate or two of fresh oysters than any other food. The elegant bivalves inspire a level of discourse often missing in our quick-meal culture -- yet one that any dining experience should never be without. And for

many people there is the added pleasure of oysters being the next best thing to sex. After all, we don't eat for the good of living but the enjoyment of it.

Vice Five: Seek Fashion First, Then seek to be Understood

In these days of dressing down and "casual Fridays," it's prudent to remember that the highly creative have always known that communication with words is secondary. When winning friends and influencing people, the primary concern is your attire -- your own peculiar fashion statement. It is through the impact of this image that both friends and enemies will initially come to know you. What is more gratifying than having everyone stop and stare, wondering why they feel so drab and ineffectual, when you enter a room? If you've got a stylish wardrobe, the battle to be understood is merely a stroll in the park.

One of the inevitable consequences of dressing down is that everyone today looks the same -- and those with designer logos like Hilfiger plastered on their clothes look plain stupid. The highly creative always choose their wardrobes with a more consistent flair. Whether it be Picasso with his striped sailors' tops, which he imagined gave him an eternally boyish edge; or Hugh Hefner with his classic pipe and silk pajamas, which he believed gave him a kind of worldly nonchalance (and could be stripped off quickly when opportunity knocked); the creative spirit picks a style and sticks with it.

Today there is a growing demand for comfort without any regard for style that numbs the mind. Comfort is, at times, a worthwhile consideration. But simply because your clothes aren't comfortable doesn't mean you can't enjoy them. In the days of Mozart, fashion was notoriously uncomfortable. Yet in a letter to his sister he once gushed, "We put on our new clothes and were as beautiful as angels." Sure, he sounds like a twit, but the important point is that the beauty and style of Mozart's wardrobe overshadowed any discomfort. And it is this attitude that inspired our own Benjamin Franklin to proclaim, "We eat to please ourselves, but dress to please others."

Vice Six: Sex

The sexual appetite and prowess of those possessed by creativity can't be argued. Anecdotes abound regarding the bedroom antics of famous writers, artists and actors. But why is it that sex yields such power over these individuals?

Perhaps Omar Sharif summed it up best when he remarked, "Making love? It's communion with a woman. The bed is our holy table. There I find passion and purification." This sense of purification is extremely important, because such an experience is needed to begin the whole creative process anew, and is a state difficult to achieve now that religious rituals have fallen by the wayside.

The catharsis that comes from this experience often leads highly creative people to pursue several lovers. And many are venomously referred to as philandering Don Juans. But it isn't for lack of affection that a Don Juan goes from woman to woman, as Camus explained: "But rather because he loves them with equal enthusiasm and each time with

all himself, that he must repeat this gift and this exploration. Why must one love rarely to love well?"

Richard Burton's lovers would agree. They proclaimed it made no difference if he were with another woman the following week because when he was with them they were his whole world (try finding a woman that understanding these days). But it's not surprising that Burton found so many willing lovers. This is how he described his lovemaking: "When you are with the only woman -- the only one you think there is for that moment -- you must love her and know her body as you would think a great musician would orchestrate a divine theme." (Today most men maneuver themselves the way a line cook orchestrates a three-minute egg.) Consequently, Burton felt that in many ways he was monogamous, because when he was with one woman, he never thought of another. Needless to say, the highly creative are highly creative at rationalizing their behavior.

Lastly, something need be said with regard to the highly creative who are lovers of the same sex. Writer and historian [Gore Vidal](#) is quoted famously as stating, "There are no heterosexuals or homosexuals, only homo- or heterosexual acts. Most people are a mixture of impulses." Maybe. But before the days of George Michael and public toilet rendezvous, sex for those driven by a desire for their own gender often took an even more mystical form than heterosexual love. In the mind of American poet Walt Whitman, sex encompassed:

all bodies, souls, meanings, proofs, delicacies, results, promulgations, songs, commands, health, pride, the maternal mystery, the seminal milk, all hopes, benefactions, bestowals, all the passions, loves, beauties, and delights of the earth.

Heckuva list.

Vice Seven: Abuse the Card

To nurture the previous six vices resources are needed. Because most highly creative people never fully enter the work force, nor make a salary sufficient to their needs, credit is a necessity. [Hunter S. Thompson](#) cut to the chase nicely when he declared that the first and most important rule of a writer is: abuse your credit for all it's worth. The highly creative travel an expensive road, and the best way to stay between the yellow lines, or at the very least keep food on your table, is to Abuse the Card. And the larger the debt the better the bet. As the essayist Samuel Johnson observed:

Small debts are like a small shot -- they are rattling on every side and can barely be escaped without a wound. Great debts are like a cannon, of loud noise but little danger.

Which must be the reason I feel so safe and secure when my card authorizes another round of drinks for the table.

Don't fear if your creditors come closing in on you. When the highly creative find themselves in financial straits, they skip town. For example, in 1891 Mark Twain took a

much-deserved vacation in Europe, which lasted nine years, leaving his legion of creditors to antagonize the less fortunate along the banks of the Mississippi. Today, it is even easier to take a long, literary holiday. And don't forget, bankruptcy is an option always worth considering. In fact, some highly creative people find utter destitution spiritually enriching. Novelist [John Updike](#) once wrote:

Bankruptcy is a sacred state, a condition beyond conditions, as theologians might say, and attempts to investigate it are necessarily obscene, like spiritualism. One only knows that he has passed into it, and lives beyond us, in a condition not ours.

Having nearly reached this "sacred state" several times already, I can't say I would describe it in such lofty terms. I prefer the more pragmatic view Shakespeare took: "He who dies pays all debt." Or Oscar Wilde's strangely sentimental one, "It is only by not paying one's bills that one can remain in the memory of the commercial classes." For my part, I'm doing all that I can to be remembered for a very long time.

In the end, everyone should remember that the highly creative always have expectations of great things. Their accumulated debt should thus be viewed only as an advance on their future earnings. But it's not an easy life. One should never underestimate the amount of distress caused by overzealous creditors. Especially when they bear down on poor debt-ridden artists, for these harassed souls are often the true visionaries of our time, or any time. When approached yet again by one of his many creditors, Lord Byron implored, "It is very iniquitous of you to make me pay my debts. You have no idea the pain it gives one." I feel his pain.

Conclusion

If anyone should still be left unconvinced on the benefits of pursuing these vices, let us remember these sage words of [Abraham Lincoln](#) : "It has been my experience that those with no vices have very few virtues."

Keep that one in mind during the next presidential election.

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About the writer

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