

FIND A SCENIUS.

**“Give what you have.
To someone, it may be better
than you dare to think.”**

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

There are a lot of destructive myths about creativity, but one of the most dangerous is the “lone genius” myth: An individual with superhuman talents appears out of nowhere at certain points in history, free of influences or precedent, with a direct connection to God or The Muse. When inspiration comes, it strikes like a lightning bolt, a lightbulb switches on in his head, and then he spends the rest of his time toiling away in his studio, shaping this idea into a finished masterpiece that he releases into the world to great fanfare. If you believe in the lone genius myth, creativity is an *antisocial* act, performed by only a few great figures—mostly dead men with names like Mozart, Einstein, or Picasso. The rest of us are left to stand around and gawk in awe at their achievements.

There’s a healthier way of thinking about creativity that the musician Brian Eno refers to as “scenius.” Under this model, great ideas are often birthed by a group of creative individuals—artists, curators, thinkers, theorists, and other

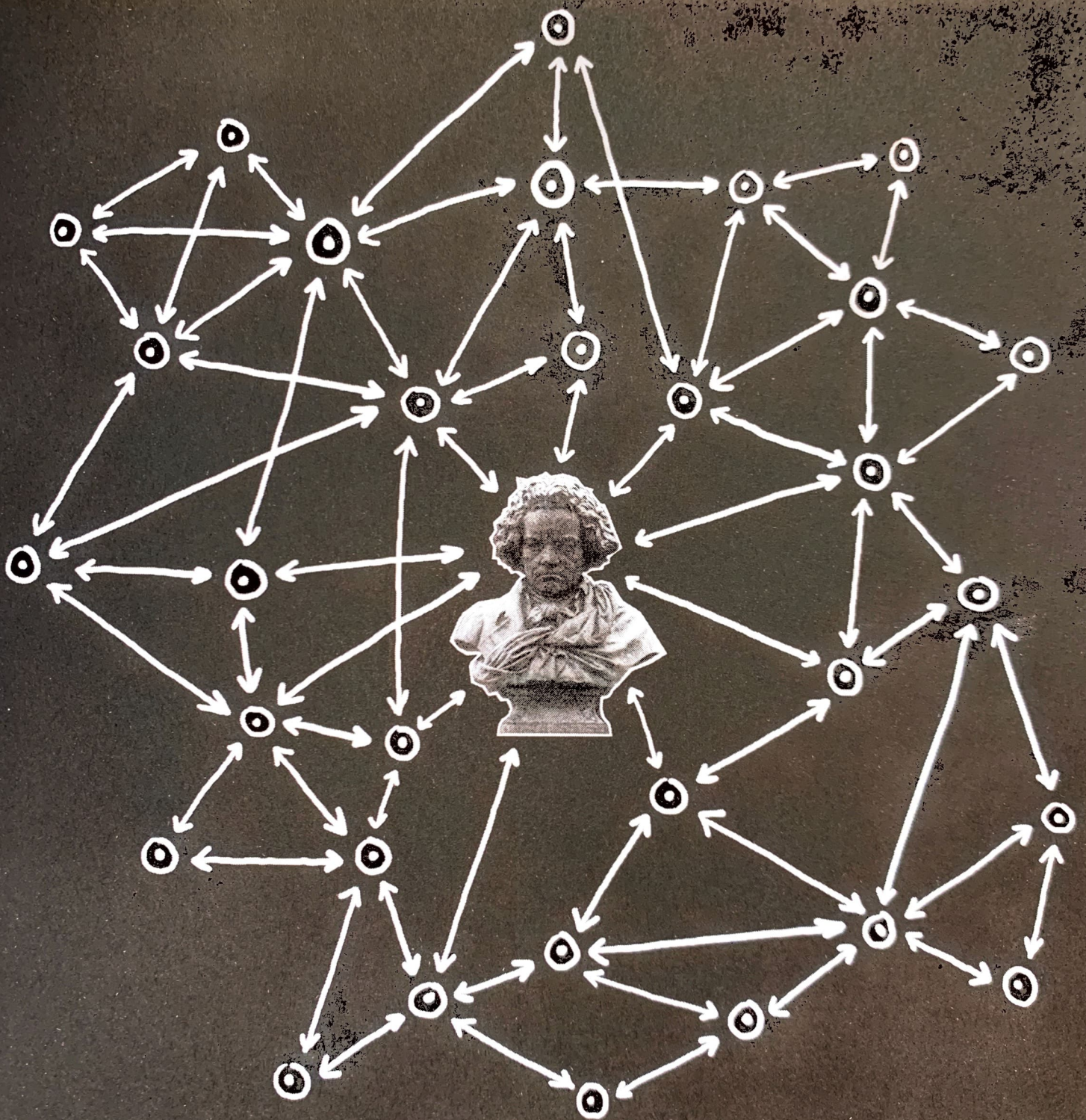


tastemakers—who make up an “ecology of talent.” If you look back closely at history, many of the people who we think of as lone geniuses were actually part of “a whole scene of people who were supporting each other, looking at each other’s work, copying from each other, stealing ideas, and contributing ideas.” Scenius doesn’t take away from the achievements of those great individuals; it just acknowledges that good work isn’t created in a vacuum, and that creativity is always, in some sense, a collaboration, the result of a mind connected to other minds.

What I love about the idea of scenius is that it makes room in the story of creativity for the rest of us: the people who don’t consider ourselves geniuses. Being a valuable part of a scenius is not necessarily about how smart or talented you are, but about what you have to contribute—the ideas you share, the quality of the connections you make, and the conversations you start. If we forget about genius and think more about how we can nurture and contribute to a scenius,

we can adjust our own expectations and the expectations of the worlds we want to accept us. We can stop asking what others can do for us, and start asking what we can do for others.

We live in an age where it's easier than ever to join a scenius. The Internet is basically a bunch of sceniuses connected together, divorced from physical geography. Blogs, social media sites, email groups, discussion boards, forums—they're all the same thing: virtual scenes where people go to hang out and talk about the things they care about. There's no bouncer, no gatekeeper, and no barrier to entering these scenes: You don't have to be rich, you don't have to be famous, and you don't have to have a fancy résumé or a degree from an expensive school. Online, everyone—the artist and the curator, the master and the apprentice, the expert and the amateur—has the ability to contribute something.



BE AN AMATEUR.

**“That’s all any of us are:
amateurs. We don’t live long
enough to be anything else.”**

—Charlie Chaplin

We're all terrified of being revealed as amateurs, but in fact, today it is the *amateur*—the enthusiast who pursues her work in the spirit of love (in French, the word means “lover”), regardless of the potential for fame, money, or career—who often has the advantage over the professional. Because they have little to lose, amateurs are willing to try anything and share the results. They take chances, experiment, and follow their whims. Sometimes, in the process of doing things in an unprofessional way, they make new discoveries. “In the beginner’s mind, there are many possibilities,” said Zen monk Shunryu Suzuki. “In the expert’s mind, there are few.”

Amateurs are not afraid to make mistakes or look ridiculous in public. They're in love, so they don't hesitate to do work that others think of as silly or just plain stupid. “The stupidest possible creative act is still a creative act,” writes Clay Shirky in his book *Cognitive Surplus*. “On the spectrum of creative work, the difference between the

mediocre and the good is vast. Mediocrity is, however, still on the spectrum; you can move from mediocre to good in increments. The real gap is between doing nothing and doing something." Amateurs know that contributing something is better than contributing nothing.

Amateurs might lack formal training, but they're all lifelong learners, and they make a point of learning in the open, so that others can learn from their failures and successes. Writer David Foster Wallace said that he thought good nonfiction was a chance to "watch somebody reasonably bright but also reasonably average pay far closer attention and think at far more length about all sorts of different stuff than most of us have a chance to in our daily lives." Amateurs fit the same bill: They're just regular people who get obsessed by something and spend a ton of time thinking out loud about it.

Sometimes, amateurs have more to teach us than experts. "It often happens that two schoolboys can solve difficulties in their work for one another better than the master can," wrote

Look

the pros are struggling,"
put an amateur

in

play at your own risk

get

out of your

league

defy

perfection

love

something

more

author C. S. Lewis. “The fellow-pupil can help more than the master because he knows less. The difficulty we want him to explain is one he has recently met. The expert met it so long ago he has forgotten.” Watching amateurs at work can also inspire us to attempt the work ourselves. “I saw the Sex Pistols,” said New Order frontman Bernard Sumner. “They were terrible. . . . I wanted to get up and be terrible with them.” Raw enthusiasm is contagious.

The world is changing at such a rapid rate that it’s turning us *all* into amateurs. Even for professionals, the best way to flourish is to retain an amateur’s spirit and embrace uncertainty and the unknown. When Radiohead frontman Thom Yorke was asked what he thought his greatest strength was, he answered, “That I don’t know what I’m doing.” Like one of his heroes, Tom Waits, whenever Yorke feels like his songwriting is getting too comfortable or stale, he’ll pick up an instrument he doesn’t know how to play and try to write with it. This is yet another trait of

amateurs—they'll use whatever tools they can get their hands on to try to get their ideas into the world. "I'm an artist, man," said John Lennon. "Give me a tuba, and I'll get you something out of it."

The best way to get started on the path to sharing your work is to think about what you want to learn, and make a commitment to learning it in front of others. Find a scenius, pay attention to what others are sharing, and then start taking note of what they're *not* sharing. Be on the lookout for voids that you can fill with your own efforts, no matter how bad they are at first. Don't worry, for now, about how you'll make money or a career off it. Forget about being an expert or a professional, and wear your amateurism (your heart, your love) on your sleeve. Share what you love, and the people who love the same things will find you.