

In my sophomore year in college, I picked up a dusty copy of *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* from our bookshelf and devoured its contents during an out-of-town trip. The concepts were at first a bit over my head, but I couldn't stop turning the page. I highlighted many lines. For the first time in reading, I felt something spark within me. I understood and embraced the concept of independence.

The road to being effective starts with acknowledging that between stimulus and response is a choice, and that we all have a choice of whether to react or to *act*. That enormous paradigm shift changed the way I approached life and interpreted every experience from then on.

Of course, I didn't have the awareness then that I do now, but the book unlocked the door to a universe within. Since then, life became to me a process of tending an abundant inner garden.

A few years later, I learned about the concept of *flow*, the experience of being so engrossed in an activity that you lose all sense of time. With it, you draw a sense of control. You lose self-consciousness. You're able to transfer ordinary experiences into rewarding experiences.

Life can be one grand experience of *flow* when we cultivate three things.

1—Learning as input

Life, to me, is one big adventure.

We ride big waves when we see what awaits us halfway around the globe, transition to parenthood, or lose a loved one.

We ride smaller waves when we read a book that expands our perspective, volunteer for a cause we're passionate about, or attend a writing course that unlocks new skills.

Then, we ride tiny waves—gifts we enjoy by being present and grateful. A sky full of stars. Mom's lasagna. A story filled with lessons.

All these things, whether isolated or combined, give life its flavor. We learn something through them, and learning is planting seeds. When we approach life this way, we find meaning in big and small things.

Growth doesn't come from learning alone, though. It has to be paired with something else: reflecting.

2—Reflecting as process

Like slapping plaster on bricks, I cement my sense of self through writing.

The worded page isn't the effect of transformation. It is *where* the transformation happens.

It's where I grapple with suddenly being cut off from someone's life or losing a father I'd been estranged from all my life.

It's where I recap what I learn in my own words, decide to agree or disagree, and connect them with other things I know.

It's where I discover innate parts of me and I decide which parts to keep and which ones to mold.

Writing gives me a sense of control, balance, and independence. There's something powerful about thinking on a blank page that validates an idea, an experience, or an impression.

If learning is planting seeds, writing is watering them.

3—Creating as output

What then, after all the learning and reflecting?

Humans aren't built to consume alone. Like a sponge, everything we take in needs to be vented out somehow, whether through our speech, our actions, or our output. A perpetual process of combustion happens in our minds and we get to decide whether it serves a purpose or not.

Our outputs vary. I write articles. Some shape bonsai. Others stitch hearts onto knitted jackets.

Some touch the lives of millions of people, while others change the life of one.

No matter the form, creating is where *flow* culminates, and that becomes our unique contribution to the world.

How do I keep a rich inner life? By intentionally tending to it—learning, reflecting, and creating. It's a virtuous cycle.