

BANISH YOUR INNER CRITIC

Silence the Voice of Self-doubt to
Unleash Creativity and Do Your Best Work

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Introduction

Are You Doing Your Best Work?

You're feeling the pressure to perform: you're on a tight deadline, and there is a lot riding on your ability to come up with something great.

But, try as you might...nothing. You can't think, you can't problem-solve. You're uninspired. Generating new or interesting ideas? You wish!

Why?

Because you

- shoot down your ideas before they even have a chance
- call yourself a failure because others around you are succeeding
- discount your ideas because they aren't 100 percent original
- tell yourself that you're just not creative at all
- have a hard time valuing what you create
- can't imagine creating without anguish and effort, so you make it true...

Unsurprisingly, you, my friend, are completely creatively blocked.

And then, when you tune into your internal self-talk, you find a steady torrent of self-chastisement, internal insults, and put-downs:

- "Why can't you come up with anything?!"
- "Wow – so you've got a master's in marketing and this is all you've got?!"
- "You're an idiot! Think, for chrissakes!"

Yikes!

Your creative paralysis is all the more frustrating because you've been on the other side. You've had moments when you danced at the intersection of your skills, interests, natural abilities, and aptitudes. You were excited, completely engaged, and seemed to be an endless fount of ideas and solutions. You felt completely knowledgeable, powerful, and competent. Whatever it was that you were doing, you totally nailed it. The experience was fantastic.

For many of us, creating is a tortured process. The torture, however, is not inherent in creating itself, but instead comes from the fears we have around our ability to create. The constellation of our fears manifests as the Inner Critic. This psychological construct can trick us into believing the very worst about ourselves

and our ability to create or do anything else of value in the world. It blocks the amazing ideas we have inside from coming out. The Inner Critic keeps us from accessing and expressing the very thing we desire: the flow of our creativity.

Based on several years of research on the creative process, articles written and presentations developed and delivered around the world, survey feedback, coaching clients, and most importantly, talking with conference and workshop attendees and other creatives of all sorts in multiple industries, I know that the Inner Critic is *the* largest block to creativity that exists.

To create, we need to acknowledge the Inner Critic and the damage it does to our work life, personal life, and general well-being.

To create lasting change, however, we really need to learn how to break its power over us so we can regain our capacity to create.

I wrote this book because I want you to be able to work better, produce more, and create with a higher level of excellence than you already do. By identifying and disempowering the various forms of the Inner Critic that plague us, we can remove the barricades standing between us and our full creative expression. This book will help you do just that.

However, I also wrote this book because I feel your pain. I know the topography of self-criticism personally: I have struggled with a particularly mean and relentless Inner Critic that has made me miserable at for most of my life. Because of my own Inner Critic, I have traveled far and wide in the lands of self-judgment and self-doubt, dismissing the creativity that I did have, believing that my work wasn't good enough, and being so focused on what others were doing that I couldn't see my own strengths or progress.

Imagine being able to create without the internal mental friction of the Inner Critic. Doesn't that sound wonderful? It's not just a pipe dream – it can be done. I know because I've experienced it myself.

You see, not only do I write this book from the standpoint of someone who was unsure that she was truly creative; I also write it from the standpoint of someone who has finally silenced her Inner Critic, who embraces and owns her creativity, and who now feels unstoppable.

Triumphing Over My Own Inner Critic

There are those who, by either good fortune or hard work, are not afflicted by self-doubt and don't seem to have much of an Inner Critic at all. And then there are the rest of us: we who struggle daily to maintain a modicum of self-assurance as we go through our work and personal lives because of the barrage of self-critical inner dialogue that is our constant companion.

I used to be in this latter group – until I had an experience that changed my life. Let me tell you what happened.

When I wrote my first book, *The CSS Detective Guide*, the experience did not start out all sunshine and Santa Claus. I landed a book contract from a serendipitous meeting at a tech conference party, and I was thrilled to be on track to achieving my two big life goals:

- 1) Becoming an author, and
- 2) Using my expert status to become a speaker.

There was only one problem: I was terrified.

The first two days of my unrealistically aggressive schedule (four and a half months to write a 250-page tech book) found me sobbing on my couch. And let me be clear about this: I wasn't sniffing quietly and dabbing at my eyes with a tissue. Oh no. I *blubbered* while sitting on the side of my couch, as my tears flowed onto the plush sage green fabric of the pillow I clutched to my chest. My fears of not knowing enough, looking stupid, being judged, being a fake and a fraud, and not being good enough all plagued me to the point of near-paralysis. Finally, on the third day I bucked up, put on my big-girl pants, and finally sat down to the very hard work of...researching. You know, the incredibly advanced and rigorous task of looking up articles on the web, reading them, and then earmarking relevant information to put in my book. Yes, it's true: I had worked myself up into an emotional froth over something that I could practically do in my sleep. As a friend of mine would say: Crazy pants!

During the next eight months of writing my book (because doing it in four and a half months was completely untenable), I came up against that inner critical voice that tried to block my ideas and creatively paralyze me almost daily. This voice told me every day that

- my ideas were stupid
- even though I had taught this subject for five years at a college level, that I wasn't enough of an expert on it
- my web designs were amateur and simplistic
- people would judge me negatively and criticize my book for not being in-depth, complete, or advanced enough

That's right: every day.

The way I often describe the experience is that instead of exercising creativity, I practiced its evil twin: destructivity. With every fearful thought of not being expert enough, not knowing enough, wondering if my writing was any good, and doubting my ability to design websites, I tore myself down. To try to build myself up, each day I had to focus on what was directly in front of me and do my best to ignore my anxieties about my perceived deficiencies. But they were still there.

Sometime in the fourth month of writing, I'd had enough. I needed to figure out how to turn off (or at least manage) this unending parade of self-critical thoughts. I did a little bit of research on self-criticism and found out about this thing called the Inner Critic. Although I didn't know it, something clicked inside of me, because a few days later, an idea for a presentation came to me in the shower. Still dripping wet and wrapped in a towel, I grabbed pencil and paper to jot down four pages of notes. A few weeks later, I was awakened at 5 a.m. by an idea for a creativity-busting workshop. Something big was brewing in my subconscious.

However, while I was designing the website for *The CSS Detective Guide*, I had a truly magical experience that changed everything.

To have my book's website up before I spoke on a panel at the major tech conference South By Southwest (SXSW) Interactive at the end of the week, I sat down to create my website mockup in Photoshop from a sketch so I could code it more easily. Much to my surprise, my quick sit-down consumed me, so much so that I was an hour and a half late going to a friend's house for dinner. Through the whole evening, I longed to return to my designing, so when I got home at 12:30 a.m., I thought "I'll just do a little bit and then go to bed." 1 a.m., then 2 a.m., and then 3 a.m. rolled by, and I just couldn't stop. With my favorite jazz playing in the background, I was in the high of creative flow as I experimented with color, typography, and layout. It was sheer bliss.

Finally, at 5:30 a.m., still fired up about designing, I stopped because I knew that if I didn't, I would surely get a migraine the next day. Buzzing from the creative juices coursing through me, I did my best to go to sleep.

Waking up again a mere two hours later, I was eager to get back to my creation. My whole body effervesced with energy. In fact, I was beyond blissful: I was euphoric. I felt a continuous rush of excitement and power similar to that of being in love. I felt like I could do anything I put my mind to. I felt like the ultimate version of myself: I felt the full power of my creative potential.

Only in retrospect did I understand why this was such an incredibly powerful peak experience: it was the first time in so long (maybe ever?) that I had experienced creating with no internal self-critical commentary: No thoughts of, "Is this any good?" or questioning my abilities. No comparing my design to those of other people. No worrying about what other people would think or say about it. For the first time in eight months, I experienced criticism-free creating.

That day I made two monumental realizations:

First, that the absence of my Inner Critic allowed my creativity to flow! Because it was quiet, there was space for my creativity and ideas to come out to play.

Second, that creativity is power, and it's a source of power that each and every one of us has.

Unfortunately, most of us rarely tap into our creative power. Why? For the same reason I sat on my couch and cried for two days instead of starting to write my book.

Because of the litany of self-critical thoughts and the self-doubt that they generate. Because of the Inner Critic.

Immediately following those realizations, I had an even deeper epiphany: helping other people reach the feeling of being energized and completely alive by allowing their creativity to flow was what I wanted to do with my life. Why? Because when we remove the blocks, we can access this source of personal power. And when we learn to remove the blocks to more regularly access and channel our creative power, we can transform our lives and the lives of others – and change the world for the better.

I became obsessed: I threw myself into learning about the creative process, specifically how to remove creative blocks. No matter which approach I studied, whether it was based on psychology, neuroscience, productivity, or practicality, they all led back to the same place: the Inner Critic.

Completing my first book did indeed become the springboard for becoming a speaker in the tech industry. Once I had established a good reputation for myself, I shifted to speaking about the creative process, removing creative blocks, and silencing the Inner Critic. As I suspected, the content resonated deeply with audiences. When I took my presentation content a step further by writing an article called “Banishing Your Inner Critic,” the response was phenomenal. Hundreds of people posted and shared the article on social media for several days. It even got celebrity attention: on Google+, actress Felicia Day shared the article and vouched for the techniques that I shared. All of the responses validated what I had suspected when the idea for the creativity talk first came to me the shower: the Inner Critic is a problem that everyone has and that *everyone* needs help with.

During the next few years, through the feedback from more talks, keynotes, workshops, several more articles, coaching clients, and heartfelt emails from attendees and readers describing how much the information spoke to them and altered their lives, I knew it was time for me to reach an even wider audience. I knew then that I had to take my content to the next level and make it more accessible to even more people. The indications were clear: it was time for me write a handbook on how to *Banish the Inner Critic*. Through this book, I could help people reclaim their creative power and start achieving more success by silencing their own voice of self-doubt.

It's Time for You to Triumph Too

You've felt lost and in a stupor, wandering your own wastelands of self-criticism. Fortunately, you are about to (re)discover your Creative Self and your Creative Power, and break yourself out of your Inner Critic-induced trance.

In this book, you will

- learn the origins of the Inner Critic

- discover the one brain function and three skills that you already possess to vanquish your Inner Critic
- learn multiple methods to deal with the fear of being negatively evaluated by others
- discover how to transform highly critical self-talk into that of approval and encouragement
- work on bolstering your sense of self to feel that you and your ideas are good enough
- acknowledge, unblock, and enhance your creativity
- channel your now flowing creativity as a force for positive change in the world

You, my friend, are a pathfinder, and this book is a manual to guide you along the path of silencing your Inner Critic. Through the pages of this book, I'll be your mentor, providing you with necessary information to change your thinking habits, and your coach, cheering you on as you release your inner critical thoughts and replace them with thoughts that support your creativity and motivate you to do your best work. Through this process, I've totally got your back.

But the best part is that through using the tools contained in these chapters, instead of being your own worst creative enemy, you'll have your own back too. By the end of this process, you'll only value and respect your creativity more, but you'll also end up liking and appreciating yourself more on the whole. Furthermore, you'll find yourself free from the weight of worrying about what others think, and you'll be able to break away from the restrictions of shoulds, musts, and oughts. You'll escape the trap of comparing yourself to others, and you'll drop the belief that you don't know enough or that you need to figure everything out by yourself.

Are you ready to start looking at the ways your Inner Critic shows up, discovering how to face your fears, bringing mistaken beliefs to the surface of your awareness, and moving beyond them to reach your own unique form of empowered creativity on the other side?

Read on, because we are about to embark on a journey to quiet that insidious Inner Critic so you can unleash your creativity, let your true talents shine, and start doing your best work – and ultimately, live your best life by channeling your creative power for good.

Let's take the first step to a whole new world right now – together.

1

Why Banish the Inner Critic?

This chapter examines:

Creativity and Creative Flow

Inner Critic Origins

Creativity v. the Inner Critic

The Need to Reclaim Creativity

A Call to Action

*"What is this self inside us, this silent observer,
Severe and speechless critic, who can terrorise us
And urge us on to futile activity,
And in the end, judge us still more severely
For the errors into which his own reproaches drove us?"*
— T.S. Eliot, *The Elder Statesman*

Our Intrinsic Creativity

The idea first comes to you unbidden. A glimmer on the edge of your perception, it's hazy, not fully formed, its edges fuzzy and indistinct. "Where did that come from?" you wonder briefly. But once you put your full attention on the idea, the longer you focus, the more clear and distinct it becomes. You begin to feel a welling within: a push from your gut and a quickening of your heart.

You *have* to capture it, this idea. You grab a piece of paper and jot down notes or do a quick sketch. Or maybe you record a quick voice memo on your phone. But the

idea won't leave you alone, and returns to you with increased insistence and clarity. Your brain starts to explode with related ideas as you start to connect the dots. Your imagination takes over, visualizing how to execute this concept that has stolen your attention.

Nothing – no mental barrier of self-doubt or questioning – comes between you and your creative work. Nothing in you says “no” or “I don't know.” Instead, everything in you says “yes” as you begin the process of making your idea manifest. And the more the details fall into place like puzzle pieces coming together, the more “yes” you feel. A rush of energy flows through you, compelling and motivating you to prioritize your brainchild. Interest, curiosity, and fascination take over.

Hours fly by as you are engrossed in your project. In the midst of making, you feel clear, super-focused, and confident. Once you've finally acted upon your idea, you feel a sense of completion and satisfaction.

While it is not the same for every single creative endeavor, this is the essence of the experience. Most people coming out of the throes of creating will tell you, face aglow and eyes still shining, that the experience, on the whole, was amazing. Regardless of whether you were designing an interface for an app, getting down ideas for your startup, writing a blog post, developing software, cooking a six-course gourmet dinner, or choreographing a performance – the process going on in your head and the sensations you were having were universal.

In fact, in my keynotes and workshops, one of my favorite pieces of audience participation is when I ask the attendees about what creative flow feels like for them. The responses – regardless of the audience location or demographics – are remarkably similar. Here are the words that come up time and time again:

Timeless • Connected • Happy • Good • Strong • Clear • Focused •
Confident • Alive • Vibrant • Energized • Everything flows • Euphoric •
Trance-like • Enjoyable • Empowered • Capable

When we are creative, we are blissfully “in the zone,” engaged in soul-satisfying making and producing. In his book *Creativity*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the pioneering researcher who first identified the state of flow, says, “when we are involved in creativity, we feel that we are living more fully than during the rest of life.” Yes! Creativity makes us feel fully alive.

Before you fall back on any limited ideas around what creativity is, allow me to dispel a few myths. You don't have to be a visual artist, writer, or musician to be creative. You don't have to be eccentric, neurotic, tortured, or starving. Creativity isn't solely the domain of a group of “special” people whom you'll never be a part of.

We are born creative. Creativity is about seeing possibilities. It's a spark, a stirring, an impetus: a powerful force that compels us to create and bring an idea to life.

This power is in everybody. We all have the desire to create something out of nothing, be it a recipe, a poem, or a business. Creativity isn't what you produce or the medium you use to produce it.

What's more, we each have our own unique form of creativity, so don't be fooled into believing that just because what you are great at creating isn't "art" that it's not valid. In fact, if you are an engineer, scientist, or anyone else of an analytic bent, and you believe yourself to be in the category of "people who aren't creative," you're wrong. Instead, you are one of the most creative and imaginative kinds of people on the planet.

I'm here to tell you that you are creative. Yes, YOU.

Creativity is the essence of our being and a part of our DNA. Indeed, neuroscience shows that we are literally wired for it.

Your Brain on Creativity

Everyone has the capacity to experience the "optimal state of consciousness where we both feel and perform our best."¹ One of the great paradoxes of creative flow, however, is that you can't force it; you can only create the proper environment for accessing it. The conditions needed to get into a flow state are a confluence of uninterrupted time to concentrate, clear goals, the correct ratio of challenge to skill, and immediate feedback from our actions.² Then the magic happens.

Once we get into flow, time perception becomes altered. Hours seem like minutes, and/or minutes seem like hours. We feel a euphoric sense of control and personal power, but paradoxically lose our sense of self. Performance of all kinds is heightened tremendously – creative performance in particular. But it gets even better: the effects of flow go beyond the immediate moment. Harvard researcher Teresa Amabile discovered that people continue to feel creative the day after.³ I call this "the flow afterglow." As we increasingly achieve creative flow, we train our brains to be even more creative.

The good news is that if you don't think of yourself as creative or trust your creativity, you can now relax. Being creative is built into the way our brains are designed to work. On a cellular level during the flow state, serotonin and dopamine, which are the pleasure-inducing brain chemicals or neurotransmitters, wash over our brains. Another neurotransmitter, endorphin, improves focus – helping to shut out distractions. This increases our ability to make new mental connections, further enhancing performance. Anandamide, a neurotransmitter whose name is derived from the Sanskrit word for bliss, enters the scene. In addition to encouraging the brain to practice lateral thinking⁴ and to release even more dopamine, anandamide helps generate pleasure and motivation.

Speaking of the brain, creativity does not happen because the "imaginative" right brain takes over the "analytical" left brain. In fact, scientists consider the concept of creativity being seated in the right side of the brain as archaic.⁵

The most exciting finding about creativity in the brain is this: researchers now consider creativity to be based in the part of the brain responsible for planning, self-evaluation, and self-censorship.⁶ The dorsolateral prefrontal cortex is where the majority of higher cognitive functions of working memory, mental imagery, and willed action (specifically self-monitoring and impulse control) lives. In other words, this is the part of the brain that interprets situations, envisions consequences, and then adapts behavior accordingly. Contrary to what you might think, the goal is not for this area to be active. Rather, creative magic happens when the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex powers down and stays quiet. Simply put, creativity comes from relaxing self-evaluation and self-judgment – and the self-criticism and self-doubt that result from them.

Therein lies the rub.

Creativity, Interrupted

Children are terrific examples of unfettered creativity; they effortlessly create worlds with their imagination. As a child, you did this too. When we were younger, we trusted the creative spark that lives within us, and we easily played with ideas and let them out into the world. Imagination was our boon companion, and creativity, our best friend.

Over time, our once close relationship with our creativity becomes strained. Instead of exercising our ability to bring forth something new and positive into the world, we begin to practice creativity's evil twin, destructivity: using our imagination in ways that sabotage our creative efforts. Why? Because a new player crops up, wedging itself between us and our once best buddy of creativity. Posing as a sworn protector, this interloper begins to whisper doubts in our ear after every letdown, every unexpected criticism, and every perceived failure.

Where we used to trust in the flow of inspiration and ideas from our creativity, we now begin to second-guess these messages through the filter of this new interpreter. We start to fall prey to the incessant internal critical voice that tells us that we don't know enough, that we might look stupid and be criticized, that our ideas aren't original, that we aren't working hard enough – and that we have to do, be, and produce more in order to be accepted. We fall victim to our anxiety that we'll be found out as a fraud, that our work has to be executed perfectly to be recognized and valued, that we will fail at the challenges we take on, or that we can't keep up with the skills and technologies that we need for our work. It's no wonder we crack under the weight of the belief that we aren't enough.

What happened to the unselfconscious state of flowing creativity that we used to enter so easily? What happened to the life-in-technicolor experiences that left us with a sense of wonder at what we produced and excitement at doing more in the future?

My friend, your enjoyable creative process and access to your creative power have been usurped by internal critical thoughts rooted in old fears and mistaken beliefs. May I introduce to you: the Inner Critic.

Meet the Inner Critic

While we are born creative, we are *not* born self-critical. Strong self-reflection is necessary to help a child evaluate her or his behavior in order to make good choices. However, self-judgment and self-criticism replaces self-reflection, and it then grows unchecked during adolescence, through adulthood, and to the ends of our lives into a force that blocks us from reaching our creative potential. Excessive self-criticism can become the predominant influence in our lives, erecting obstructions to opportunities and holding us back from stepping into our creative greatness. What is this particular form of unchecked self-criticism? This psychological construct is known as the Inner Critic.

Born from experiences internalized early in life, the Inner Critic is an amalgamation of every critical thing we've ever heard (or thought we heard) from people of influence. In their attempts to push us to conform to the norms of society, parents, older family members or caretakers, teachers, coaches, siblings, peers, and friends are a fount of criticism-filled messages. In our impressionable state, we internalize these criticisms. We model them, viewing ourselves from a place of criticism and judgment. We may even unconsciously emulate the negative beliefs that the people closest to us hold about themselves.

Thus, messages from our childhood like, "you will never be successful" or "your ideas are no good" embed themselves into our psyches. As we get older, these criticisms and judgments become so deeply ingrained that we no longer can recognize them as messages that originated from outside of our own minds. We then believe these critical messages to be our own truths, forming the warp and weft of the fabric of how we relate to ourselves.

Although the Inner Critic is also known as the inner critical voice⁷, you may not detect its presence by actually hearing a voice. The Inner Critic can be sneaky, working to avoid detection by trying to appear as your native thoughts. So familiar as to be invisible, your Inner Critic reflex may be so automatic that you may not even register the thoughts. If you do not detect its presence, you'll most likely recognize the Inner Critic through the habitual negative self-talk that directly influences your behavior.

What drives the Inner Critic? The desire to protect ourselves.

Our emotional minds developed the Inner Critic as a protection strategy against situations in which we could be judged, rejected, or criticized. In its determination to keep these potential future threats at bay, the Inner Critic defends our well-being and social safety the moment we have a sense of losing either. I think of the Inner Critic as a proactive mental threat-to-self system.

But all of this still doesn't answer the question of what's the true source of the Inner Critic. What do our inner critical thoughts have in common at their core? One word: Fear.

If you're feeling anxious, guilty, or ashamed around your creativity, it's likely a result of the Inner Critic's handiwork. When we are deep in the woods of our inner critical thoughts, in essence, we are experiencing fear. Having these feelings disrupts relaxed and ordered thinking, and in its place, we experience what Csikszentmihalyi calls "disordered attention." In this state, we turn our attention inward and focus on the negative, destroying our ability to pursue positive external goals or even accomplish the task at hand. The more we are in this state of mind, the more our capacity for enjoyment plummets as it becomes more difficult to learn anything new. Instead, we rehash old information, wandering the forest of our fears with no means to problem-solve our way out of it.

Creativity vs. The Inner Critic

Earlier, we learned that the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that judges, criticizes, and rules self-inhibition, falls silent when we go into creative flow. *This is the seat of the Inner Critic.* Research shows that not only does a quiet Inner Critic facilitate creative flow, but creative flow conversely keeps the Inner Critic quiet. Creativity and the Inner Critic, then, are inextricably connected. But they are binary: they cannot coexist. If your Inner Critic is in control, then accessing your creativity will be elusive at best and impossible at worst.

Yes, you've had success with creative projects, and yes, you may have been fairly satisfied with what you produced after the fact. However, if you had an overly active Inner Critic during the process, the fact that that you were able to produce was *despite* its overbearing presence rather than because of its allegedly beneficial input. Instead of feeling protected, you had to slog through a quagmire of anxiety. Is this really how you want to create?

Any self-judgment, self-criticism, or doubts about your abilities will obliterate creative flow, ripping you from your creative high to cast you back on the ground while you grapple with your fears. Your prefrontal cortex, which was previously favorably inactive, fires back up with a litany of allegedly rational reasons to go into self-protection mode. All while this transpires, the door to your creative power slams shut and you cannot fully realize your vision. The Inner Critic is the enemy of creativity, productivity, and sanity.

In contrast, when we are in creative flow, we feel the full potential of our personal creative power, an enhanced and strengthened sense of self. People who experience creative flow regularly report feeling focused and creative, engaged and motivated, active and connected, and strong and in control. This place of empowerment is our true creative home.

Feeling fully creative like this is what we want and need. But so many of us cut ourselves off from this power, by judging ideas before they have a chance to develop, attempting to attain unreachable standards, creating barriers for ourselves, keeping our imaginations under wraps, or denying that we are creative at all. But we can do better. We can do more with this powerful force.

If you think of creating as an unpleasant and agonizing process – then you’re not thinking about actual creating. Instead, you’re recalling the sensation of the Inner Critic triggering your fears and supplanting the process. *It’s the Inner Critic that makes creating painful.* Your critical thoughts are the main blockade to your creativity. They thwart the fluid process of ideas moving from your internal subconscious universe to your conscious mind to access and make tangible.

In succumbing to the voice of doubt, we relinquish our creative power to the Inner Critic. According to Csikszentmihalyi, the struggle for wresting control from the Inner Critic is no less than the battle for the self. Make no mistake: the struggle is real.

Here is the simple truth:

To be creative, you have to silence the Inner Critic.

Banishing the Inner Critic is what we need to do to reclaim our creative power.

Reclaiming Creativity

First, the bad news: we each have an Inner Critic, and try as we might, we can neither run away from our Inner Critic nor completely destroy it. The Inner Critic is a part of our psyche and being human.

Don’t throw up your hands in despair! Despite all of the psychological power that it holds, the Inner Critic is really a way of thinking – a series of thoughts. Even more simply put, it is electrical impulses in the brain. Neurons firing. Chemicals being released and recognized by receptors in the brain. Just as we can learn to control our breathing, we can learn to have a better handle on these processes in our brains to be more in control of our thoughts, beliefs, and consequent actions.

Now here’s the good news: if we can learn to switch off (or at the very least, tone down) the self-evaluation, self-judgment and criticism, and self-doubt, then we can activate and light up the areas in the brain associated with self-expression. We can create the space and lay the foundations for getting into our creative flow.

Remember that child full of wonder and unfettered creativity at the beginning of the chapter? That’s you deep inside. Also inside is the self that embodies all of the inherent potential you were born with and that will always be there: the capacities you’ve realized and those that you have yet to actualize. I like to think of this as your true self, your Creative Self. It existed before the layers of societal expectation were heaped upon your shoulders, and it will stand triumphant once you shake off the shoulds, musts, and oughts. This part of you is what you started with: completely

connected to your own flow of ideas, with a perspective on the world which only you have, and an experiential filter that comprises your own unique creativity.

This inherent Creative Self is key. It is what fills people with awe when witnessing an inspired musical performance or a gifted athlete. This complete absence of friction, self-doubt, and self-judgment entrances and inspires us. It's beautiful. Their complete expression of the Creative Self gives us something to aspire to ourselves.

Did you know that there is no word in the Tibetan language for creativity or being creative? The closest translation is "natural."⁸ In other words, if you want to be more creative, you have to be more natural, more of yourself. However, the Inner Critic tells us that only if we're hard on ourselves can we become the people we're meant to be. This is a lie. The people who we are meant to be are exactly who we are. We're meant to become more of ourselves – not cookie cutter copies of those around us.

Your Creative Self is where your creative power lies, the source of your brilliance. This is your powerful self; it is your brain clicking into gear and activating the wonderfully complex network that is hardwired not only into your brain but your soul. The Creative Self trusts itself, knows its strengths, and delights in pushing its boundaries. The Creative Self is far stronger, far more knowledgeable, and infinitely more capable than the Inner Critic.⁹ We need to reduce the Inner Critic's interference so the Creative Self can do what it does best: creating.

The Inner Critic is like static, while the Creative Self is the station you're trying to tune in to. We do have a choice: we don't have to listen to the static. By giving the Inner Critic less of our bandwidth, we access, express, and cultivate our creativity; we take back our creative power. From this place of reclaimed creative power, we can go after even bigger challenges.

Reclaiming creativity is an act of courage: choosing to act in the face of the fear that the Inner Critic generates, and making a conscious choice to think differently in order to access your Creative Self.

How do we reach this Creative Self? Trying to fix the affliction of the Inner Critic with its own tools is not going to work. You can't bully, threaten, or coerce the Inner Critic. It wrote the handbook and knows all of the tricks. No, we have to use a totally different approach to banish the Inner Critic.

With training, the mind can replace distorted patterns of thinking. To release the Inner Critic's hold on our creative thinking and access to our creativity, we're going to set out to learn new approaches, practices, and tools. In the coming chapters, we'll discover much-needed antidotes to the Inner Critic's pernicious guises of the fear of judgment and criticism, being highly self-critical, feeling deficient, having a habit of comparison, and denying creativity.

Are you ready? Let's retrain our minds so that we can banish the Inner Critic, access our Creative Selves, and reclaim our creative power.

Notes: Chapter 1 – Why Banish the Inner Critic?

¹ Kotler, Steven. "Flow States and Creativity." Psychology Today. Accessed December 16, 2016. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-playing-field/201402/flow-states-and-creativity>.

² Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 48-67.

³ Kotler, "Flow States and Creativity."

⁴ Kotler, "Flow States and Creativity."

⁵ Anne McIlroy, "Neuroscientists Try to Unlock the Origins of Creativity." The Globe and Mail. Accessed December 16, 2016. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/science/neuroscientists-try-to-unlock-the-origins-of-creativity/article565081/>.

⁶ McIlroy, "Neuroscientists Try to Unlock the Origins of Creativity."

⁷ Firestone, Robert, Lisa A. Firestone, and Joyce Catlett. *Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice: A Revolutionary Program to Counter Negative Thoughts and Live Free from Imagined Limitations*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2002.

⁸ David Kelley and Tom Kelley, *Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us All* (2013), 6.

⁹ W. Timothy Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Work* (New York: Random House, 2000), 7.