

Brainwashed

seven ways to reinvent yourself

Seth Godin



Years ago, when you were about four years old, the system set out to persuade you of something that isn't true.

Not just persuade, but drill, practice, reinforce and, yes, brainwash.

The mission: to teach you that you're average; That compliant work is the best way to a reliable living; That creating average stuff for average people, again and again, is a safe and easy way to get what you want.

Step out of line and the system would nudge (or push) you back to the center. Show signs of real creativity, originality or even genius, and well-meaning parents, teachers and authority figures would eagerly line up to get you back in line.

Our culture needed compliant workers, people who would contribute without complaint, and we set out to create as many of them as we could.

And so generations of students turned into generations of cogs—factory workers in search of a sinecure. We were brainwashed into fitting in, and then discovered that the economy wanted people who stood out instead.

When exactly were we brainwashed into believing that the best way to earn a living is to have a job?

I think each one of us needs to start with that.

Over time, the benefit of working for the man and following a manual as a compliant cog is going to go down, while, paradoxically, the difficulty in getting a decent job will go up.

We just lived through a few generations of huge companies that got bigger, giant bureaucracies that got bigger and white-collar jobs that got farther and farther away from actually making something that a customer might buy.

And then, pretty suddenly, that faded. Unemployment goes up, downsizing happens, layers of fat disappear and the idea that you could get a good job, indoors, paid well, doing not much except watching the dog that bites the pilot if he messes with the autopilot... well, those jobs are gone.

Is that it? Are you done? Is this the end of the road, the best it's going to get, the beginning of the end?

Same job, but more work, less pay.

Same industry, but less growth, no challenges.

Same path, fewer options.

It's entirely possible that you've trudged as far as you can go on this road, and that the slog is just going to be more of the same. Possible.

But I don't believe it.

Why?

Because there's more leverage, more degrees of freedom and more opportunity today than ever before—if you're up for the choice.

The new industrial revolution (the one we're living through, the one that's changing everything) has opened doors for anyone (or certainly anyone with enough resources and education to be able to read this document). If you've got the time, the intellect and the access to get your hands on an idea that spread as this manifesto did, then you have the ability to reinvent yourself, regardless of what you do, who you do it with, or what the people around you expect.

The pillars we grew up with (things like General Motors, TV, the postal service, retirement, top down media and commodities) are disappearing and are being replaced with entirely new ways of interacting, making a living and making a difference. Not just for organizations, but for individuals—people like you.

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Look around you. Who are the successful people in our world today? It's not the Jack Welch, captain-of-industry type, nor is it the pension-earning, go-to-work-every-day-for-fifty-years factory man. A fundamental shift has happened, right under our feet. The system—the much vaunted system, the system that nurtured our parents and even our grandparents—has turned sour.

It's like this: we were brainwashed. Brainwashed into believing a set of rules that aren't true (any more). And because the brainwashing has been so complete, the shifts in our world and new opportunities they open up are easy to see as ways to shore up yesterday's faltering system. Please, don't fall for that. Don't use the tools of today to support your effort to do yesterday's job better. This is an opportunity to completely reinvent your role in the system.

Do you remember learning to factor quadrilateral equations? $x^2 - 32x + 12$? Why were you taught this? Why did they spend hours drilling you on such clearly useless content? Simple: you were being trained to be a compliant cog, someone who could mindlessly follow instructions as opposed to seeking out innovation and surprise.

The evidence is clear. The function of public education was (and is) to turn out compliant workers. Not educated voters, not passionate ideamakers. No, we spend all this money on school taxes to be sure that there will be enough people to do all the work that the factories once needed done. Exceptional teachers, the ones who make a difference, are not only rare, but they're almost always in trouble for bending the rules and not optimizing for the standardized tests.

I love math. I love the idea of working with numbers, of inventing cool ideas that click. But memorizing factors of 32? It's clearly an effort to teach you to be taught, to instruct you in compliance, to follow the curriculum.

The brainwashing continues to this day. You've been brainwashed to believe that you're stuck with what you've got, that you need to punch a clock, follow a manual and do what you're told. I wonder who dreamed that up? It's certainly in the interest of the dominant forces of our society to create an oversupply of eager and compliant workers. But now, as the power shifts, so does your opportunity.

Are you serious about transformation? I'm not talking about polishing yourself, improving yourself, making things a bit better. I'm talking about the reset button, a reinvention that changes the game. That means an overhaul in what you believe and how you do your job. If you're up for that, then right here, right now, you can start.

Do work that matters.

Four words available to anyone. They're here if you want them. The economy just gave you leverage—the leverage to make a difference, the leverage to spread your ideas and the leverage to have impact. More people have more leverage (more chances and more power) to change the world than at any other time in history. What are you going to do about it? When?

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Here are seven levers available for anyone (like you) in search of reinvention:

1. Connect
2. Be generous
3. Make art
4. Acknowledge the lizard
5. Ship
6. Fail
7. Learn

CONNECT

Social media is either a time-wasting, wool-gathering, yak-shaving waste of effort or, perhaps, just maybe, it's a crack in the wall between you and the rest of the world. It's a choice... up to you.

If you're keeping score of how many followers you have, how many comments you get or how big your online footprint is, then you're measuring the wrong thing and probably distracting yourself from what matters.

On the other hand, digital media can offer you a chance to make real connections, to earn permission and gain insights from people you'd never have a chance to interact with any other way.

We were isolated, now we're connected. The typical individual didn't have the time, the money or the connections to be heard just a few years ago. Today, the door is wide open... but only the people who can touch us will step over the threshold. If you can reach and (far more importantly) touch or change people, you will gain in influence, authority and power.

Shepard Fairey made a poster of Barack Obama. The Internet helped it spread. The poster connected one supporter to another and became an icon, a freely shared ID badge (and ultimately a parody). And in the center of the spread was the artist. It doesn't matter that Fairey didn't make a penny selling the image. What matters is that he connected, and that connection gave his art leverage. He'll never need to look for work or revenue again. It will find him.

We grew up isolated. The future is connected. We grew up unable to have substantial interactions with anyone except a small circle of family and co-workers. Now, we earn the right to interact with just about anyone.

I think this changes everything... if we let it.

BE GENEROUS

The new economy often involves trading in things that don't cost money. There's no incremental cost in writing an essay, composing a song or making an introduction. Since it doesn't cost money to play, we have the ability to give before we get.

The generosity economy rewards people who create and participate in circles of gifts. Not the direct I-gave-you-this-you-give-me-that giving and get of a traditional economy, but instead the tribal economy of individuals supporting one another.

Tribes of talented individuals who are connected, mutually trustful and supported by one another are in a position to create a movement, to deliver items of value, to move ideas forward faster than any individual ever could.

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Derek Sivers built CDBaby.com from a bedroom startup into a multimillion-dollar seller of independent music. Under his watch, he was selling more music from more artists than anyone before in history. The secret? He spent virtually all of his time supporting the artists. The software he developed, the posts he wrote, the systems he instituted—they were gifts, generous contributions from Derek to the artists he worked with. In return, the artists built a thriving community, one that couldn't help but turn a profit.

MAKE ART

Art is an original gift, a connection that changes the recipient, a human ability to make a difference. Art isn't a painting or even a poem, it's something that any of us can do. If you interact with others, you have the platform to create something new—something that changes everything. I call that art.

Art is the opposite of trigonometry. Art doesn't follow instructions or a manual or a boss's orders. Instead, art is the very human act of creating the uncreated, of connecting with another person at a human level. What we've seen is that more and more markets will reward art handsomely, and hand out the compliant work to the lowest bidder.

Kathy Sierra does art when she teaches us about user interfaces, and Mary Ann Davis does art when she pushes the edges of what pottery can become. Art feels risky because it is. The risk the artist takes is that you might not like it, might not be touched, might actually laugh at the effort. And it's taking these risks that lead us to get rewarded.

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ACKNOWLEDGE THE LIZARD

The lizard brain—that prehistoric brainstem that all of us must contend with—doesn't like being laughed at. It's the part of our brain that worries about safety and dishes out anger. Being laughed at is the lizard brain's worst nightmare. And so it shuts down our art.

Steven Pressfield calls this shutdown, “the resistance.” The resistance is the little voice in your head that keeps your head down and encourages you to follow instructions. The resistance lives in fear, and doesn't hesitate to shut us down at the first sign of possible derision or the first hint of conceivable ostracization. The resistance is the voice that was complicit in the brainwashing, because the resistance is easy to arouse. When your teacher threatens you with (insert social punishment here) if you don't do your work in school, you do the work. The resistance wins.

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risks that leads us to get rewarded.

What artists over time have figured out is that the resistance is the sole barrier between today and their art. That the act of genius required to produce original and important work is crippled by the resistance, and ignoring the voice of skepticism is critical in doing the work.

And so, we acknowledge it. We stand up and we hear the voice of the lizard brain and we recognize that it's there and then we walk to the podium and do the work. We acknowledge the lizard so we can ignore it.

SHIP

Scarcity creates value. People pay extra for things that are hard to get, while things that have a surplus go cheap. That's basic economics.

So, what's scarce?

The ability to ship.

If you can get something out the door while your competitors cringe in fear, you win. If you're the team member that makes things happen, you become indispensable. If you and your organization are the ones (the only ones) that can get things done, close the sale, ship the product and make a difference, you're the linchpins—the ones we can't live without.

Shipping is difficult because of the lizard brain. The resistance doesn't want you to ship, because if you ship, you might fail. If you ship, we might laugh at you. If you ship, you may be held accountable for the decisions you made.

The key to the reinvention of who you are, then, is to become someone who ships. The goal is to have the rare skill of actually getting things done, making them happen and creating outcomes that people seek out.

Michael Dell ships. So do Larry Ellison and Anne Mulcahy. Quieting the lizard, acknowledging it and then ignoring it—it's the only way.

FAIL

A key part of shipping is the ability to fail. The reinvention of the marketplace demands that one have the ability to fail, often and with grace—and in public!

The old economy was based on factories and institutions, things that took a long time to build. No one at Buick or the Metropolitan Opera was interested in failure. It took too long to create these institutions for them to relish the idea of growth through failure.

Today, though, the only way for organizations to grow is to ship risky things, to create change, to make art, to change people. And yet, shipping risks failure.

And so we demand you fail.

I hope you're up for that.

For generations, artists tried to feign nonchalance. There's even a word for it: Sprezzatura. It's an Italian word, defined as "a certain nonchalance, so as to conceal all art and make whatever one does or says appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it."

We need a new word now, one that means the opposite. It's the obvious and supreme effort that goes into creating art, challenging the lizard and fighting the resistance.

The reinvention of the marketplace demands that one have the ability to fail, often and with grace—and in public!

LEARN

The seventh pillar is the key to the other six.

School used to exist to learn a trade. You apprenticed, and then you worked the rest of your life in the same job, in the same town, in the same factory, doing the same work.

Ha.

Dream on. Only lighthouse operators have that “luxury” today, and when was the last time you met a lighthouse operator?

To bring the school-as-event mindset to work today is to court certain failure. School isn't over. School is now. School is blogs and experiments and experiences and the constant failure of shipping and learning.

You already took a first step. You read something that challenged you to think differently. The path to reinvention, though, is just that—a path. The opportunity of our time is to discard what you think you know and instead learn what you need to learn. **Every single day.** 📖



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SETH GODIN is the author of *Linchpin: Are You Indispensable?* He's written a dozen other books, started a few Internet companies and writes [a blog](#). He's pleased to have a two-word biography: Seth ships.

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