

WITH
THE ENTHUSIASTIC
COLLABORATION OF
NUMEROUS CREATIVES including
award-winners undergoing
brain scans, social entrepreneurs,
students, activists, scientists,
psychiatrists, soldiers, and 450,000
research participants.
PLUS A SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION
FROM HIS HOLINESS THE
DALAI LAMA.

MARK WOERDE

CREATIVE UNDER FIRE

**A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR CREATIVE PEOPLE
ON STAYING SANE
WHILE SOLVING THE WORLD'S
INSANE PROBLEMS**





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With the enthusiastic collaboration of numerous creatives, including award-winners undergoing brain scans, social entrepreneurs, students, activists, scientists, psychiatrists, soldiers, and 450,000 research participants. Plus, a special contribution from His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

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Creative Under Fire

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Lets
Heal



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INTRODUCTION

*“The truly creative mind in any field is no more than this:
A human creature born abnormally, inhumanly sensitive.
To him... a touch is a blow, a sound is a noise, a misfortune is a
tragedy, a joy is an ecstasy, a friend is a lover, a lover is a god,
and failure is death.” — Pearl S. Buck¹*

If you see yourself in that eloquent quote by Pearl S. Buck, this book is for you.

We’re incredibly fortunate to possess a remarkable gift: creativity. It’s our superpower, empowering us to tackle the world’s significant challenges with fresh, innovative solutions. But, there’s a catch. Our creativity, this unique talent of ours, often comes intertwined with heightened sensitivity. While that’s not an issue when crafting things like toothpaste commercials, it can present a hurdle when addressing pressing global issues. It’s not uncommon for creatives to feel overwhelmed, even to the point of encountering mental health challenges that hinder creativity and impact.

Having dealt with this myself, as I share with you in Chapter 1, opening up about my emotional journey, I embarked on a quest

to better understand this dynamic. I wanted to gain some insight into how I could be *creative under fire*, and thus increase my impact when tackling the world's most daunting problems.

As I delved deeper, I discovered I wasn't alone in my wish to use creativity for good and I am also not alone in grappling with these issues. I found that many creatives anticipate a decline in their future mental well-being. A discovery that inspired the creation of this project, aimed at sharing the tips and tricks from this book with you. I mean, we can collectively make a much greater impact if we all learn to be *creative under fire*. And so, in Chapter 2, I detail the outcomes of the extensive studies conducted, including brain scans of creatives, large quantitative data analyses, and engage in conversations with hundreds of creatives, students, activists, and social entrepreneurs. And amidst our investigation, we stumbled upon another remarkable observation—a significant stressor among creatives—a large majority struggle to get their ideas out of their heads and realize their world-bettering ideas.

But insights are one thing; what you do with them is another! How to turn these intriguing findings into concrete tools, to be *creative under fire*, I consulted many experts from neuropsychologists to soldiers, from His Holiness the Dalai Lama to razor-sharp research analysts, haptotherapists, along with dozens of other extremely fascinating experts. And of course, I've incorporated my tools. This collaborative journey led to Chapter 3, where ten tips and tricks are presented that you won't typically encounter in your education, but I wish I had known as a young creative striving to make this world a better place. Everything has been tested on willing participants and myself. I'm deeply grateful to all the people who helped me along the way. This was definitely not a solo project.

I truly hope you find these insights and tips valuable!
Considering that a staggering 22% of people worldwide belong to the group creatives, my goal is for this book to help you turn your ideas into meaningful projects, while keeping your sanity intact. Most importantly, I'm cheering for you to achieve incredible success with your world-changing ideas!

Mark Woerde

February 2024

PREFACE

2013, New York, in a small room at the United Nations building.
*“Mark, we want you to find a solution to stop the killing of our colleagues.
This morning, three of our colleagues were murdered in rural Pakistan.”*

And there you are, sitting with your sketchbook in a small room filled with an emotional UN delegation, expecting you to find a creative fix. I felt the pain of this team, and imagined how the situation high in the mountains of Pakistan must have been, and more than anything felt the enormous pressure to come up with a good solution. I felt a weight on my chest and a highest state of readiness, but also the thrill that what I was doing really mattered. But there wasn't much time to dwell on how I was feeling because, within the hour, the next world problem would be beating down the door. So, it was straight down to work. Placing me and my team of wonderful creatives in this situation was no coincidence; it was my initiative to prove that creatives can do so much more with our talent than just sell stuff or entertain people.² For the first time, I felt that using creativity to solve real, heavy, and urgent problems is not a bad idea at all. It does however bring a whole different form of stress than a deadline for an advertising concept.

That feeling of stress, though still vivid a decade later, pales in comparison to the two-years I spent leading an intense, and ultimately successful, intervention. This risky initiative brought to light a new form of sexual child exploitation, capturing the attention of politicians and police forces globally. During the operation, we innovatively identified and handed over 1,000 predators to Interpol, garnered the gaze of over one billion viewers in the evening news and, most importantly, led to the actual rescue of children.

I wouldn't have wanted to miss it for the world. But it came at a price. Dealing with the intense pain of speaking with child victims, facing the stress of catching predators, leading and taking care of a team of highly motivated, talented, but also vulnerable creative individuals. Then of course, came the enormous attention and results after the release, and the stress that had piled up during the two years of the operation. The impact only hit me after successfully completing it. And not just a little. I'll share more about the effects it has on me personally in Chapter 1.

It was such a noteworthy project, that I jumped at the opportunity to share my story at a number of creative festivals, including the Cannes Lions Festival in 2016. There, I not only talked about our creative intervention against the sexual exploitation of children, but also, for the first time, discussed what such an intense project can do to you as a creative person. That struck a chord with the audience. It was the moment when I realized that the topic of how to *remain creative under fire* is not only important to me, but also to every creative individual using their talent to make the world a better place. So, I decided it was time to embrace this topic. Over the past years, I've spoken with many experts, young activists, creatives, artists, students, social entrepreneurs,

researchers, aid workers, soldiers, psychiatrists, neuroscientists, and prominent figures like His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who shared surprising and practical tips and insights with me. We also conducted research, including scanning the brains of some internationally acclaimed and award-winning creatives. This not only produced a beautiful image showing the difference between the brains of creatives versus a control group, but also provided valuable insights. Additionally, together with the Amsterdam-based research firm Glocalities, we conducted a study involving 450,000 people, which led to an unexpected and intriguing insight that proved to be extremely helpful in becoming more impactful as a creative. All will be revealed in Chapter 2.

It took some time for this book to be completed, primarily because we were also busy conducting several other creative interventions. Some were above the radar (I'll tell more about those later in this book), and some I can't mention, except to say that I've had ample opportunity to test the tips in this book on myself... and believe me — they work.

What I can already reveal is that some commonly promoted solutions for dealing with stressful emotional situations may not necessarily be effective for creatives. In this book, for example, you won't find tricks to help you shut off your emotions. And not without reason, as aptly expressed by my friend, David Bowie's former pianist, Mike Garson, *"As a creative you have to be willing to be vulnerable, 'cause if you shut down filters, you can't create. You need to tune into the frequencies of all the suffering."*

Early in the process of writing this book, I thought about relaying the insights I had gained from the wonderful professionals in high-stress jobs, such as the emergency services, to the creative world. Unfortunately, that assumption was a bit too simplistic.

These remarkable aid workers rely heavily on established, tried-and-tested methods. While these methods hold undeniable merit, and I have incorporated some of their lessons into this book where possible, I'm afraid they're not directly applicable to creatives seeking to tackle significant global issues. Creativity inherently involves devising novel solutions in situations where no predefined method exists.

And lastly, one ineffective piece of advice I often received when sharing what I was working on is the well-intentioned, Zen-like coping mechanism; "It is what it is. Let it go." Essentially, it suggests that certain things are beyond your control, so you should let them be. However, this mindset contradicts the essence of a creative. A true creative goes all out to bring their vision within their sphere of influence. So, it is what it is, is precisely what a true creative doesn't think, or at least, shouldn't.

In short, it's high time for some tips specifically aimed at the creative who wants to stay sane while tackling insane problems. And how amazing would that be when you consider the impact we can have? A whopping 22% of the world's population belongs to the group creatives (see Chapter 2). Additionally, tens of millions of people work in the creative industry.³ We can be an enormous force for good. Because your imagination is essential to solving unimaginable challenges, I ask you to please take care of your mental health when addressing serious world problems.

For certainty, here are two disclaimers.

Disclaimer 1

If you take the title *Creative Under Fire* literally, you might think that this book provides tips for creatives who are literally under fire in a wartime situation. That's not the case. While I have had

the opportunity to gather insights and tips from creatives in wartime situations, which I do find very helpful (see Chapter 3, Tip 6, War is Work). This book is written for people who are not in a personally unsafe situation and have the luxury of choosing to use their talents for a better world.

Disclaimer 2

If you are currently experiencing serious mental issues, please seek professional help immediately! You are not alone. I have spoken with many young creatives and activists who suffer from the problems of today's world. This is nothing to be ashamed of, on the contrary. However, please keep in mind that I'm basing this book on lived experiences. I'm not a trained neuroscientist, counselor, or psychiatrist. In this project, I am more of a student, a test subject, a compiler rather than an authority. I am simply sharing my insights, and I certainly don't have all the answers, and am very open to your feedback and comments, because I am far from being done learning. I sincerely hope that for this book, the adage holds: "You can teach best what you most need to learn."⁴

Thank you very much for picking up this book. And most importantly, good luck! The world needs you.

ps. Good to know: There is no financial or commercial interest associated with this project. While there is a paper version of the book, its print run will be limited for environmental reasons. Please opt for the free E-book. Anyone is free to download it with no strings attached from LetsHeal.org/book. And please feel free to share it with like-minded individuals.

CHAPTER 1

PUTTING MYSELF UNDER FIRE

I've been lucky enough through the course of my career to have the opportunity to try to come up with creative solutions aimed at making the world a better place. I would like to share two of the more radical creative initiatives, both of which succeeded in making a significant impact on the world. However, they also had a profound effect on me, my family, and the wonderful teams who worked on them, ultimately due to the stress levels of the work. I hope that the lessons learned will assist you in maintaining creativity under pressure. First, I'll delve into the Sweetie project, designed to combat Webcam Child Sex Tourism, and then Make Friends Across Religions, a venture intended to alleviate social tensions.

How it started

Many years ago, I co-founded and ran an ad agency in the Netherlands, where we extensively experimented with prioritizing meaning over financial gains for the big brands we collaborated with. Through firsthand experience, we discovered that when a brand engages in ambitious initiatives for society, it can have a substantial impact and, interestingly, be advantageous for

business. Recognizing the potential synergy between societal contributions and business success, I began contemplating what could happen if companies harnessed their significant power to contribute positively to the world.

This contemplation materialized in 2010, as LetsHeal, my initiative aimed at persuading brands and companies to embrace pro-social values. Marketing directors found this approach intriguing, prompting them to seek evidence of its viability. To provide proof, I initiated what was probably the world's largest research project on the meaning of life, in relation to brands. We collaborated with experts from esteemed institutions, such as Columbia University and the United Nations. The results of this research evolved into the book *How Advertising Will Heal the World and Your Business*⁴, garnering considerable press attention. I also had the privilege of touring the world, delivering numerous talks to thousands of marketing and advertising professionals, clarifying how brands can authentically become meaningful. I am confident that this journey has made a positive impact, and I am grateful that the insights from that book are still being implemented today.

Certainly, it was great to be able to share my findings everywhere and anywhere, and by the number of followers it attracted, it felt truly valuable. However, there was a flip side. I'm a creative, not really a researcher, presenter, or writer. I felt a sense of isolation, thinking, "What am I doing? Telling others what to do is all fine and good, but couldn't I inspire more good with action instead of words?" I decided to start working on the most radical creative intervention I could conceive.

Time to get radically creative

And so began my quest to find the right issue for me to take on. In Chapter 3 (Tip 9, Have No Mercy, Kill Your Darlings), I describe an initial idea that, for valid reasons, didn't materialize. After letting go of that idea, I waited for a new topic that would resonate with me, and not long after, it happened. I still remember sitting quietly before the workday began, sipping my coffee, reading the newspaper, and stumbling upon an interview that would shape my life for the next two years and ultimately have a tremendous impact on the world. All right I thought, let the adventure begin.

ADVENTURE 1 SWEETIE

That day, I read an article in a national newspaper, in which the director of Terre des Hommes Netherlands, an anti-child exploitation NGO, told the reporter that their shelters in the Philippines were overloaded with children. These children were victims of something extremely dark and disturbing, something I had never encountered before: very young children were forced to perform sexual acts in front of webcams, and men from other countries were paying to watch and direct them. This was so new that no term had yet been coined for this type of exploitation.

The director of Terre des Hommes, Albert Jaap van Santbrink, urged readers of the newspaper to donate money so that they could better assist these children.

I began imagining the potential vastness of the global demand for: "Webcam Child Sex Tourism", (the term we later coined for this form of exploitation). For all the predominantly men out

there with a sexual preference for children, it seemed there were virtually no barriers left in terms of child exploitation. With expanding access to the Internet in impoverished countries, this could become an increasingly dangerous phenomenon. So, I decided to call the director and ask him, “Shouldn’t we also do something to stop the demand for this abuse?” He immediately responded, “Great idea, let’s do it.”

Let’s destroy the demand

But, of course, I had no idea how yet. I was only consumed by the topic and felt compelled to combat it, that is if it truly existed. That night, I decided to investigate further and went online to witness it for myself. Within five minutes (and I am not a computer expert by any means), I encountered a young boy from the Philippines. He said he was only eight years old, my son’s age at that time, and he was clearly not sitting there to talk about his progress in school. Dumbfounded by how easy it was to find and how awful it was to imagine, I ended the chat well before it crossed any line of impropriety. Staring at a blank screen, I felt overcome with emotion, and later that night even cried, which I don’t do easily. That somber feeling made way for an extreme form of determination. My goal couldn’t be to inspire the creative industry anymore; my sole focus had shifted to destroying this demand. But how?

I didn’t just want to raise awareness of the issue; I wanted to bring a solution to it. Solutions are what we should be looking for, not giving the public another problem they can’t solve. And to solve that problem, you first have to truly understand it. So we decided to do an in-depth study. We spent months and months researching, interviewing victims, aid workers, and experts, and

analyzing a mountain of international legal documents. And the problem turned out to be much bigger than we had thought. We found tens of thousands of young children who were placed behind the webcam. Some as young as five years old. The demand was potentially huge. We estimated that at any given moment there were 750,000 people online with a sexual preference for children, leading to tens of thousands of kids being abused this way every day, and this was just in the Philippines.

Our initial line of thought was questioning whether these activities were already illegal and if not, how should we promote legislation to criminalize them. We found however, that it is already a crime in almost all countries. We also spent a long time searching for a way to interfere with the monetary aspect of the system. It was very disturbing to discover how easy it is to make untraceable payments, so this wasn't going to be how we could block the demand; there would always be a way to bypass the system. We had to look further.

So, what needed to change? One could argue that poverty is the main underlying problem, but that's of course too broad. So, we searched for months and months, and eventually the simple solution dawned on me. In Geneva, my teammate Ali Marmaduke and I spoke with a legal expert who talked in depth about the legal system endlessly. It wasn't particularly inspiring, and I almost thought we had traveled to Switzerland for nothing until, in passing, he mentioned what made it all fall in place for me. He said, "Well, these children obviously don't report the crime." Finally! I knew what we needed to change to fight against the demand.

Children in the Philippines can't report the crime. And the legal system requires that these crimes be reported before the police commence an investigation. This works perfectly in countries

where Webcam Child Sex Tourism doesn't take place and children aren't forced on a massive scale to do it.

So, if, for instance, my kids are harassed via webcam, I report it to the police immediately, and they will take action. However, children who are forced into such situations cannot go to the police. So, what we needed to change is that police worldwide shift from reactive policing to proactive policing. This would mean that police forces would have to start proactively investigating websites and chat rooms where this abuse takes place, rather than waiting for victims to come forward.

I can imagine that you, after reading about all this research, might be thinking, "Where's the creative part?" However, without this fundamental piece of the puzzle, to which we dedicated around eight months of our time. Resulting in two comprehensive reports, we would have had no way of knowing if our creative project was on the right track. Without research in advance, your work risks becoming mere speculation, and you end up with something nice without any meaningful impact. In Chapter 3 (Tip 3, Small is Great), I briefly describe how to develop such a theory of change. It may not be the main focus of this book, but I believe it's a pity to put all your efforts into using your talent for good, without having a clear direction. In my view, it's essential. In summary, it might seem a bit dull, but it's oh-so-necessary.

Ok, let's track down and identify 1,000 predators

But then, how do you bring this to the attention of international politicians and police forces worldwide? The simplest approach would have been to call them, to inform them about the problem and request budget allocations. However, while I never underestimate the effectiveness of a skilled cold caller, I'm afraid I lacked

the influence to achieve any results through that method. So, it was time to shake things up a bit.

So, here is the essence of my line of thinking regarding our communication goal. First, we needed to demonstrate the magnitude of this problem. Second, we wanted to illustrate how easily it was to identify the predators, emphasizing that proactive policing would be a feasible solution. I therefore decided to trace 1,000 online predators. If our small organization could achieve this, it implied that police forces worldwide could also effortlessly track down hundreds of thousands of predators each year, by simply patrolling the websites where these crimes are taking place.

Some serious precautions

I knew we had to take a few precautions. International criminal organizations or gangs could be involved, so safety came first. For this, it had to be a covert operation. Only the management team of my advertising agency was aware that we were working on this project. And by 'we', I'm referring to the best core team I could have envisioned working with: Niels Pel, Dennis van Aalst, Ali Marmaduke, Rik Doorschodt, Chester de Vries, and Bram Tervoort. Without this incredible team of complimentary characters, pulling off this operation wouldn't have been possible.

We rented a warehouse under a false name in a shady industrial area in Amsterdam. We set up an untraceable secure internet connection to disguise our digital trails, even creating a fake organization to process any financial transactions. Since we had decided to enter a very murky world using a false identity, tracking predators might even be legally questionable. To address this, we recorded our intentions beforehand with a notary.

We agreed that anyone from the team could exit at any time without issue (which someone did), and we consciously accepted the risk of the potential legal consequences. Additionally, I arranged for psychological support for the team members. The operational team consisted of four highly motivated, intelligent, creative young people who were eager to embark on a very special, undercover operation. Now, that sounds much more exciting than the research phase, doesn't it?

The idea was to pose as a 10-year-old Filipino girl among the other children on the websites we had identified earlier. It was surreal; the moment we went online from our warehouse and logged in as a 10-year-old Filipino girl, men swarmed toward us.

They all insisted that we switch on our webcam, though, naturally, there was nothing to see on our side. That was the moment when we decided to transform our warehouse into a typical Filipino internet cafe. Most of the time, we managed to delay activating the camera, allowing us to uncover their identity based on the bits of information they provided. Often, they were oblivious to the fact that they were openly disclosing certain hints about their contact information. And it's crucial to note that even though there was often a technical opportunity, we never hacked into a predator's computer. Doing so might shift the public discourse towards privacy rather than focusing on the real issue. However, in some cases, mere excuses for our malfunctioning webcam seemed insufficient. So, we contemplated whether we should use a real child, which would have been morally inappropriate of course, or a doll, until we came up with the idea of developing a virtual girl that we could control. On letsheal.org/book, you can watch a short video showing how we achieved this.

Just over a decade ago, creating a realistic virtual girl posed a considerable technological challenge. In hindsight, one might suggest that our virtual girl was one of the earliest serious endeavors to create a deepfake.⁵

With the assistance of outstanding designers, motion captureurs, and programmers, under the leadership of Bram Tervoort and the guidance of Mao Lin Liao. We successfully brought a life-like girl into existence. Copywriter Chester de Vries named her *Sweetie1000*. We shortened this to *Sweetie*, aligning with the names of many real children and had to endure the harrowing reality. This choice of the project name also resonated with our mission to expose 1,000 predators. Due to the technicalities, the team expanded significantly beyond our core group. In total, around 80 people worked on this project, all under strict confidentiality. Even though no one had a complete picture of how everything came together, everyone understood and felt the importance and uniqueness of the project. I am deeply grateful for their remarkable contributions. Looking back, it turned out to be a tremendous success, but back then, it was a risky and uncertain operation. I am also proud that everyone was able to keep this project a secret for so long. Especially given the immense stress of having to keep quiet about this demanding operation with friends and family. Having to remain untruthful about one's daily activities only added to the burden.

And perhaps you are wondering, who funded all of this? Well, the director of Terre des Hommes made the courageous decision to allocate their entire annual communication budget to us, which was approximately 300,000 euros. We subsequently, together with all of our partners contributed more than an additional 1,000,000 euros in time, resources and money to make it happen.

What I still find truly remarkable is, that the lack of funds was not an obstacle for anyone who was involved; the issue had to be addressed. See also Chapter 3 (Tip 7, Money No Issue).

So let's continue with the story.

This is how it worked: while one researcher posed as a young girl and chatted with a predator, the other researcher tracked down the predator's identity, including their home address, footage of their webcam, and the log of the chat session. It may sound straightforward now, but it only became a standard approach after we'd studied the interaction between predators and victims for many months and practiced it endlessly beforehand. We terminated the session after the predator made his intentions known and agreed to pay. No financial transactions were made with the predator. In certain instances, particularly with more seasoned predators who were less inclined to believe our excuse about the malfunctioning webcam, we positioned our *living Sweetie* behind the camera. Good to know, Sweetie did not perform any sexual act.

Ten weeks, 20,000 men willing to pay for sex with Sweetie

Within ten weeks, we had interacted with 20,000 men who were willing to pay for webcam sex with Sweetie. We were able to fully identify 1,000 predators from 71 different countries. My goal was to uncover predators from as many different countries as possible, to ensure widespread media coverage. This necessitated conducting night shifts and extremely early morning sessions, due to the varying time zones in different countries.

Even though it seemed like we were getting closer and closer,

it became increasingly challenging for the team to handle day-to-day interactions with the predators. These predators didn't conform to the stereotypical image at all; they were ordinary men with regular families. The realization that anyone could be a predator affected how we perceived the outside world. On the other hand, more and more, the operation started to resemble a game, unmasking as many predators as quickly as possible, giving the team an extreme adrenaline rush. However, playing a game for a few hours is okay, but week in, week out, can be detrimental to your health.

From the beginning, I hired a mental health counselor who visited twice a week, taking each team member for a one-on-one walk, which helped ground them. Nevertheless, they still experienced physical symptoms, ranging from severe stomach pain to headaches. I contemplated stopping the project several times, but I realized that, as the person in charge, I was the only one considering it. And amid that doubt, my friend and professor from Columbia University, Dirk Salomons, who has years of experience in peace negotiations under extraordinarily challenging conditions, happened to visit our secret warehouse as one of the very few outsiders during the operation. I asked him to not only assess the quality of our reports, but also to provide encouragement to the team as an outsider. And he did just that.

“Guys, in a few weeks, this challenging operation will be over. I know how difficult it is for you now, but with a bit of luck, you will be making history here, and this terrible form of child abuse will soon be addressed. Don't forget why you're doing this.” All of us welled up with tears. Dirk helped reshape everyone's perspective away from the relentless 24/7 task of apprehending predators in complete secrecy, by bringing us back towards the original goal of the operation.

With just a few weeks remaining, thanks to the encouraging words of an outsider who truly understood our struggle, we saw the light at the end of the tunnel again. We started to view it once more as a task to be accomplished. Despite one nerve-racking moment when we unintentionally had an incorrect server setting, momentarily exposing our true IP address in Amsterdam. Fortunately, we avoided detection and went on to successfully reach our astonishing milestone of identifying one thousand predators, while encountering relatively few issues.

Ready to launch?

Not quite yet. We had a thorough understanding of the phenomenon, had written two reports, and found a viable solution to the problem. On top of that, we innovatively exposed and fully identified 1,000 predators whom we intended to hand over to Interpol, the International Criminal Police Organization, the world's largest international police organization, which has national bureaus in all 196 member states.

But, how do you turn that into world news in a way that would actually persuade global decision-makers to put Webcam Child Sex Tourism on the political agenda?

I believe our PR strategy was tricky but smart. We invited the press, informing them that we were about to unveil one of the largest cases of sexual abuse in recent history, implying that it was already under investigation by legal authorities, when in fact it wasn't. Interpol and other police organizations were unaware that we had initiated this operation, and that was for a reason. One could argue that in some countries, our approach might itself be illegal, with the risk that our operation would be prohibited, thereby diminishing the possibility of getting it on the agenda.

A week before the planned press conference, we began mobilizing the news media and I had the *honor* of making the first call. And that was stressful; what if they didn't respond, despite all our efforts? The first news outlet I called was the German DPA, The German Press Agency. "Hello, we have a story that's going to break on Monday: we have 51 Germans involved in the world's largest recent sexual abuse case. Should I make a parking reservation for your news van?" And it worked. Without further inquiries, we successfully garnered interest from all major international and national media to come to a press conference location in The Hague.

Let Sweetie do the talking to 1 billion viewers

I had envisioned the idea of hosting the press conference from Nieuwspoor in The Hague, a neutral and well-known venue with all the necessary connections for international media coverage. Additionally, I thought it would be beneficial to have a prominent figure narrate the story. I attempted to engage Oprah Winfrey for this role, but unfortunately, she found the subject matter too dark. I understand her reservations; after all, we had no idea how it would be received, making it a potentially sensitive topic for her to bring to the world. Another suitable candidate we considered was George Clooney, who expressed some interest. However, the timing of the press conference clashed with the launch of his commendable *Not On Our Watch*, non-profit initiative in the Darfur region. Faced with these challenges, the question arose: who would be the spokesperson for the event?

Fortunately, just in the nick of time, our exceptional team of designers, programmers, and animators succeeded in enabling our computer model to articulate a few sentences in a compelling and believable manner. This would mark Sweetie's first time

speaking. In our predator identification process, speaking wasn't essential, as our research showed that victims mostly typed and rarely spoke. This spared us from the challenge of making Sweetie talk convincingly without exposing her artificial nature. Replicating eyes and speech in animation is tough, given human sensitivity to these features. Fortunately, Sweetie managed to speak a few words convincingly, just in time for the press conference. This allowed her to take center stage, becoming the focal point of the entire event.

We had managed to keep the secret throughout the nearly two years of preparation, but when you start contacting the media worldwide, any competent journalist is naturally going to start asking questions. It happened as predicted, that the then Dutch Minister of Security and Justice, Ivo Opstelten, was questioned about the operation. However, he had no answers because, as mentioned earlier, we did not inform the justice system before the press conference. Consequently, on a Friday afternoon, the minister decided to call *Terre des Hommes*. They were clever enough to quickly set their spokesperson's voicemail, stating that they were closed and would be available again on Monday, the day of the press conference.

If I were in the minister's position, I might have arranged for an intrusive visit or blocked the entrance of the intended press conference venue until there was clarity. Concerned, I spent the night before the press event wandering around the location, checking for any increased police activity. As a precaution, I also secured an alternative venue, but as it turned out, none of it was necessary. On Monday, the eagerly awaited day arrived, and all major global news outlets participated in our conference — AP, Reuters, CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera, Russian and Chinese State Television, and nearly every national news outlet from the 71 countries where

we identified predators were present. Bram and I were seated in the control room, and we could hardly believe our eyes — they were all there. What a relief.

And then Sweetie addressed the audience;

“My name is Sweetie, I’m ten years old, I live in the Philippines. Every day I have to sit in front of the webcam and talk to men, just like tens of thousands of other kids, the men ask me to take off my clothes. They play with themselves, they want me to play with myself. As soon as I go online they come to me, but what they don’t know is, I’m not real. I’m a computer model made piece by piece to track down men who do this.”

At least one billion people saw it on the evening news. And due to all the subsequent coverage, perhaps even 1.5 billion. Everything and everyone was in motion. Immediately after the press conference, the hard drive containing the data on the 1,000 predators and our reports were handed over to Interpol. As we expected, there was an almost immediate attempt to find the data on Terre des Hommes’ network. But they never had the data, and everything had already been wiped clean from our end. The only entity in possession of the data from that point on was Interpol.

And then the actual miracle occurred. Political and public outrage was substantial, and police forces worldwide were tasked with addressing this issue, which they willingly embraced. Laws were amended where necessary, it became the official number one crime in the Philippines, men were arrested, and even though it wasn’t our intention, we got the impression that some individuals from our database may have been apprehended. Our primary aim with the operation was to demonstrate the magnitude of the problem and showcase proactive policing as a viable solution. If it turns out that predators from our operation were indeed arrested,

I am relieved that I had excluded predators from countries with legal systems differing from our Western systems, such as Iraq or Saudi Arabia. Ultimately, we were merely amateur investigators, and errors cannot be entirely ruled out. In these countries, the penalties could be considerably harsher than the four-year maximum prison sentence in many Western nations.

But, most importantly, children were and are being rescued. Please watch the video about this intervention on letsheal.org/book.

Body says “No”

And that marked the end for us. After two years of relentless day and night work on this project, it abruptly halted, right after the press conference. All our efforts, creations, and lessons learned were handed over to Terre des Hommes. This was it for us. And still, nobody was aware of our involvement. Of course, we wanted to keep it that way, to see how things would unfold. After spending a night absorbing the news, the next day we had a major pitch for a telecom provider — crucial for the continuity of our agency. However, to be honest, I couldn't care less. With adrenaline still coursing through my body, I'm afraid I radiated exactly what I felt. “Get out of here with your silly advertising questions and sales objectives.” And they did. That was also the day we shared the news of what we had been doing with our colleagues at the office who had no clue, with the condition that they wouldn't disclose anything to the outside world. When I returned home that evening, my 8-year-old son, who also had no idea that we were behind this project, exclaimed, “Dad, you have to hear this! Some people caught criminals with a robot girl, it was on school television, so cool.” I said nothing, but couldn't feel prouder.

Terre des Hommes acted as our proxy, our intermediary. And for a specific reason—I didn't want to be labeled as a Predator Hunter for the rest of my life. We did our part, and in addition to this, Terre des Hommes could provide the essential follow-up, including safety measures, for the years following the intervention. Consequently, all the attention shifted to them. They received all the recognition, became the opinion leader in this field, experienced a substantial influx of new contributors, and garnered millions in donations from various sources. I'm genuinely delighted for them.

So, in the weeks following the launch, we dismantled the warehouse and threw a party for all the amazing individuals who had tirelessly worked on this project for so long. I began contemplating a new creative intervention with a clean slate—a completely different subject, preferably something related to the environment. However, I didn't yet feel like I could truly embark on something new. I didn't have a sense of closure. I hesitated to reveal that we were behind it. Would it be safe? Would it not hinder Terre des Hommes too much? What I found truly fantastic during that period was that all of our partners, everyone who had invested a significant amount of their time and money, none of them looked to take credit, while the whole world was talking about it. This once again affirmed the pure intentions of everyone involved.

And as amazing as I'd found that, I also felt like it wasn't quite finished. That changed when I received an email from one of the UN experts we had consulted on the issue, congratulating us and saying, "Hey... isn't this what you wanted? To set an example for your peers of what could happen if creative people use their talent for good in the most radical way. So why don't you show it?" So, that's exactly what we did. At three selected festivals for creatives,

including the Cannes Lions Festival, we told our story and won everything there was to win. But more importantly, we shared the story with any creative willing to hear it. I also did one TV interview on the biggest talk show in the Netherlands, to finally put closure to the matter.

After that, I received requests from all over the world to tell the story to the public at large, but of course, all of them were redirected to Terre des Hommes. And at that moment, I thought, “it’s done. Time for something new. Onwards and upwards.”

But my body was saying something entirely different. I had made an effort to take care of everyone else, but had forgotten to take care of myself. After all, was it even necessary? Hadn’t I had everything under control, and hadn’t everything worked out as planned? Well, not entirely, as it turned out. In the two years we were working on this project, a significant amount of stress had naturally accumulated. I had set everything aside — my family, my friends, my business, my hobbies — devoting day and night to this, and everything spilled out one evening as I watched a broadcast of Peter R. De Vries, a renowned Dutch crime-fighter, who was later tragically murdered in 2021.

In that broadcast, Peter R. de Vries bought a child from impoverished parents in a developing country to expose violations of children’s rights. The girl was around 8 years old. Peter paid the parents a few dollars, and the child packed her bag, went with Peter, a completely unknown man to her, and bid farewell to her parents for the rest of her life. Of course, Peter R. de Vries didn’t buy her in the end, and later she was supported by the *KidsRights Foundation*, but as a viewer, I wasn’t aware of that at the time. And that’s when everything hit me. All the sorrow and stress that had accumulated within me over the two years of the Sweetie operation erupted, and I felt terrible. I sought help at the local

hospital with palpitations and, as it turned out, very high blood pressure. I also sought assistance from various psychologists, and gradually, my body started to believe that the project was truly over. I thought, “I should never do this again in this way.”

Once you have experienced the immense power of how your creativity can truly make an impact, it feels like a moral obligation, the strong desire to do it again. This made it increasingly difficult for me to stay genuinely motivated to take on tasks that didn't truly matter. I decided it was time to say goodbye to my agency and focus solely on impactful creative interventions through LetsHeal. To make that possible, at least for a while, the agency had to be sold, and I am happy and grateful that it eventually all worked out.

ADVENTURE 2

MAKING FRIENDS ACROSS RELIGIONS

Putting myself under fire, again

After the Sweetie project, I began contemplating what the next project should be. I envisioned something related to combating climate change, but as it turned out, something different would keep me occupied for the next few years. Thanks to the success of the Sweetie project, I was frequently invited to speak, and I enjoyed sharing the insights behind the Sweetie operation within the creative sector. That's how I ended up giving a talk at the Most Contagious festival in London. Afterward, I was approached by a delegate, a young Muslim, and soon to become my new friend,

Mirage Islam. What he asked surprised me. “Mark, would you like to come up with something to change how people perceive me?”

“I feel like they think I am a terrorist, That I’m a bad person, that I want to blow up the bus I step into....and that’s purely based on how I look and how, I’m... not even dressed, it’s the color of my skin.”

“Wait, seriously?” I thought, “You’re like my doppelgänger, with spiky hair and fancy glasses. Let’s grab a coffee!” After our chat, I was on the train back home, wondering: “Do people believe others of different faiths dislike them?” In that case, there might be a lot of unnecessary social tension. Wouldn’t it be great to see if we could reduce that tension a bit? Along those lines, I thought, who better than the world’s most prominent religious leaders to do that. If they set a joint example, it could have a positive impact. Excited about this new, somewhat naive idea, I stepped off the train and into, what was for me, the entirely unknown world of religions.

So, let’s first investigate whether the assumption is indeed accurate. Martijn Lampert, the research director of Glocalities, could confirm, that after conducting research among 56,000 people, that a message of friendship across religions is likely to resonate with the majority of the world’s religious people, comprising 84% of the world population, according to the Pew Research Center. It will resonate well, because the research shows that people of all faiths are generally open to those with other beliefs. However, they tend to think that others might not be as open to them, and that leads to tension. And no one less than Prof. Gregory M. Reichberg of the Norwegian Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) could better elucidate that. He explained that the misunderstanding “sets us up for a bad dynamic and tends to

produce what we fear.” That misunderstanding stems from the lack of contact between religious people of different faiths, fueling prejudices and social tension.

With that foundation in mind, I thought it might make sense to entice the world’s most prominent religious leaders to issue a joint call to connect with those of different religious beliefs. And when I say the world’s most prominent religious leaders, I’m referring to the widely recognized names. I aimed to include all of them to address the broadest audience possible.

I don’t know if any of the readers of this book have ever tried to get a seat at the table with a well-known religious leader, let alone attempted to have them convey something you’ve conceived, but it ain’t easy. The thought of *whether* it would succeed did not cross my mind; I solely focused on *how* we could accomplish it. This was the nearly impossible new challenge I was looking for. I thought I had found a shortcut by pitching the idea to the BBC, because they could easily bring the message to life and disseminate it, but unfortunately, the response was, “Nice idea, but we don’t generate our own news.”

Too bad, let’s do it ourselves then

How? Well, I envisioned orchestrating the most effective one-on-one direct marketing campaign we had ever attempted. We first explored how individual leaders might respond to the theme of this project. Is it theologically feasible, and what considerations might persuade a specific leader to think, “Hey, I want to participate”? We quickly realized that answering those questions was no simple task, and it was challenging for us to gauge exactly how the social network of each leader is structured. Therefore, we sought out experts in this field, leading us to connect with,

among others, my new friend Rabbi Dr. Alon Goshen-Gottstein, the director of the Elijah Interfaith Institute.⁶ This institute would later play an instrumental role as the proxy for this initiative.

Rabbi Dr. Alon Goshen-Gottstein found the idea so compelling that he boarded a plane from Jerusalem to Amsterdam the next day. And so, the collaboration began, and we exchanged countless letters, made numerous phone calls, and traveled extensively. In some cases, Alon's network brought us very close to the leaders and their social circles. However, my trump card was our complete independence and our non-religious backgrounds, with no other goal than achieving the joint appeal.

Through his institute, Alon proved able to directly approach several leaders from his own network, and this progressed relatively quickly. "Relatively quickly" meaning it took six months to a year per leader. While the Sweetie project focused on action, this endeavor was primarily about having endless patience. I think that the great sense of humor brought to the table by all the team members and the continuous focus on the end goal made the waiting somewhat bearable. The central team for this project included Dennis van Aalst as the project supervisor, Bram Tervoort overseeing the visual aspects, and Ali Marmaduke serving as the co-strategist. Many thanks to Peter de Lange, Remco Marinus, Willem van der Schoot, Pepijn Rooijens and Tim Claassen for their unwavering support in crucial moments of the project.

We sent letter after letter, knowing that after three months, we would receive a rejection that often contained a promising angle, prompting us to try again. This approach enabled us to get some leaders in front of the camera within a year, although the first to be filmed weren't the most well-known ones. It took about 2.5 years until we also had the last remaining name on the list His Holiness Pope Francis, on camera.

I say on camera, because organizing a physical gathering of all the leaders together, proved beyond our capabilities, given the security concerns and time constraints. So, we opted for video statements. We searched for an angle that went beyond merely urging people to make contact with those of different religions. And I unexpectedly found that angle at a concert by the Dutch rapper Typhoon, who brought the audience together by declaring “we’re all friends!” And I thought, bingo! This is it. A call to: “make friends across religions”, is much warmer and feels more special than merely encouraging contact.

The most challenging part of this operation was securing the commitment of all the leaders. When I stress all, I mean having every prominent figure on board, because otherwise, it would not be perceived as a joint statement. It took a long time, writing numerous letters, facing rejection after rejection, talking to countless people, finding new approaches to secure a yes... and sometimes we got a hit and were able to record a statement, which felt like checking off the box on the bingo card.

I was brought back to the original intention of the project after visiting the very charismatic Ayatollah Al-Milani. I was alone with my video camera in his mosque, the recording went smoothly, completed in no time, and this after months and months of pestering and pleading. However, I wasn’t back in the Netherlands for long, when my phone started making strange sounds, and my computer mouse didn’t respond quite as it should. I quickly called my friend, a security expert, and he had a simple explanation: you’re temporarily placed under surveillance; it happens often, especially with journalists, probably by the Israeli security service. It’s not surprising when you have contact with a prominent rabbi one moment, and a prominent

ayatollah the next. It will be over in a week. Just continue with what you're doing.

That made me realize that our initiative was indeed more than just playing bingo. The clarity of this struck me fully when I approached the Archbishop of Canterbury, literally knocking on the gate of Lambeth Palace in London, England. As I knocked, the surroundings transformed into a sort of war zone because, at that very moment, a terrorist attack was unfolding outside the Palace of Westminster, the seat of the British Parliament in London. A 52-year-old Briton drove a car into pedestrians on the pavement, along the south side of Westminster Bridge, injuring over 50 people, with four fatalities. In the chaos that ensued, the Archbishop's palace went into lockdown, with helicopters hovering above it. After confirming that there was no immediate threat, the archbishop agreed to meet me and we recorded a statement emphasizing the importance of reaching out to each other, especially on a day like that. A truly impressive speech. Please see letsheal.org/book for a short video clip from that day.

However, we hadn't reached our goal yet. After two years, we recorded statements from most of the prominent leaders. But we were still missing two from our list. Without them, the message would lack the weight of a collective statement from all major religious leaders, which would be essential for optimum media impact. But we still hadn't managed to secure His Holiness the Dalai Lama, or His Holiness Pope Francis yet. If these two didn't participate, I would be forced to cancel the project. We were however, determined to give it our all and pursue it relentlessly.

Here's how we tried to involve the Dalai Lama. With the help of our mutual friend, Dutch Rabbi Soetendorp,⁷ it seemed, after two years of trying, that we might finally succeed in capturing the

Dalai Lama's contribution during His Holiness's visit to Brussels. Considering His Holiness's track record of uncertain availability, often canceling plans at the last minute, and the fact that I wasn't thinking clearly due to the grief over my father's critical health condition, I misjudged the situation. By the way, my father, who was nearing the end of his life, would even consider death a poor excuse for not keeping an appointment. Nonetheless, I didn't accurately assess the timing, and I would not have been able to make it to Brussels within two hours anyway.

I received a phone call from Soetendorp, urging me to come to the venue immediately, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was ready to make his statement. I couldn't let my own mistake jeopardize capturing a video of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I knew I couldn't be in Brussels in time, and when I asked for a one-hour delay, the unmistakable response from the entourage of His Holiness the Dalai Lama followed: "His Holiness is not amused." I also knew that if I didn't resolve this immediately, our chance would be lost. So quickly searching for alternatives. I couldn't find a cameraman through my network on Saturday morning. I couldn't think of anything else but to ask Soetendorp if he could approach people at the location to make a recording, even if it had to be done with a phone.

Imagine asking Rabbi Soetendorp, a highly respected elderly spiritual leader, to roam through the vast building in Brussels, searching for someone willing to film the statement of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. How unprofessional could I be? After two years, working toward this moment, and then not being there. It was truly embarrassing, and as I type this, I relive the frustration, stress, and shame that those present in my living room, my family, on that particular Saturday also experienced. I'm truly sorry, guys.

But Soetendorp saved the day, and I am immensely grateful to him for being willing to rectify my mistake. Luck was on our side! Before he had to even ask around, the exceptionally friendly Stef Meerbergen, a journalist from Belgian VRT, offered to help. So, the next day, we received extremely professional footage of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and a beautiful contribution to the appeal.

We had almost everyone now, except for one, Pope Francis. The first leader we approached was the pope, and after a few months, we received his rejection. So, we sent a new letter, and again, a rejection came after a few months. We then sent a third, well-crafted letter, but still no result. It seemed like we weren't breaking through, and that was confirmed when we heard through the grapevine that the message might be considered too progressive.

It was high time to find a way to reach the pope directly. And Alon found a great new route. He thought it might be possible to approach a longtime friend of Pope Francis, the prominent Argentinian Rabbi Skorka, and ask him to directly introduce our project to the pope. A long shot, of course, but after much effort, we managed to convince Skorka to present the project to the pope, during his next visit to the Vatican. Rabbi Skorka made it clear to us that he already had three important topics that he wanted to discuss with his friend Pope Francis, so there might not be time to also include ours. As you might guess, after months of waiting for their physical meeting, our subject wasn't discussed, only subtly mentioned. The message came back that maybe the next time they would meet might be more promising... which would take place approximately six months later. Rabbi Skorka asked us to join him in Rome for that meeting. He couldn't guarantee anything, but

at least we should be present in case it did. With the lesson from my mistake with the filming of His Holiness the Dalai Lama still fresh in my mind, I didn't need to be asked twice, and went to Rome with Bram Tervoort. Our first task was to gain the trust of Rabbi Skorka to ensure he would bring up our project this time.

And there we were, patiently waiting in the restaurant where we had arranged to meet Skorka. The first thing he said was, "Don't think for a moment that you'll succeed in convincing me tonight..." and the tone was set. I was shocked, but later discovered that he couldn't ensure success and didn't want to make promises he couldn't fulfill, so he was saying this to avoid disappointment. However, as the evening progressed, we all became more relaxed, we even danced, and as we left the restaurant, the message was clear: "Make sure you're on St. Peter's Square tomorrow." And so we were... all day, with our camera on St. Peter's Square. Would it work? Yes and no. We finally received the call at the end of the day, "Guys, the Pope appreciates the initiative, also loves the Sweetie campaign, so maybe it will work this week, maybe not." Alon decided not to wait any longer and left Italy, but Bram and I thought, let's just wait a bit longer; everyone is still around for a few more days, you never know.

And guess what! Rabbi Skorka came up with a plan to get us in direct contact with the pope. The next day, there would be a book presentation at the Vatican that he had organized with a small delegation from Argentina. At the end of the presentation, the small group of attendees would be allowed a brief conversation with the pope, and that was supposed to be our moment. As long as we joined the end of the line. And we did, step by step, we got closer, and then it happened: with the pope, we received a firm handshake. The pope mentioned that he found the Sweetie campaign fantastic and had a quarter of an hour to contribute to

the appeal. We followed the pope as he briskly walked to a small adjacent room, leaving the communication staff in bewilderment. We pulled the camera out of the bag, and with trembling hands, we recorded the final contribution. What a relief. Finally! After 2.5 years, we had succeeded. We had pulled it off; now the rest of the world just had to see it.

I spent a lot of time thinking about where we should make the announcement. The location matters because it can really shape how people view it. For example, announcing it in Rome or Jerusalem might make it seem like we're leaning towards one religion over the others. How about launching it from space? From the sea? Hmm, that's all a bit odd. Eventually, I thought that an international and primarily news-oriented platform like Twitter might be suitable — at the time it was less controversial. What if we could launch the message from @twitter, the main account? That way, we would not only reach many people at once, but it would also feel like a news event. To our delight, Twitter was willing to lend its main account for this. The European headquarters are in London, so we thought it would be convenient to hold the press conference there since many representatives of the media channels are also based in London. So, we arranged a beautiful studio to stream the press conference from and invited all the media.

And then the day arrived, the day of our launch after two and a half years of hard work. We had excellent media coverage lined up, the video had turned out beautifully — thanks to the fantastic team.

What could possibly go wrong?

Well, I saw that when I looked out of my hotel window on the morning of the press conference. There was a plume of smoke,

and not a small one, roughly in the direction of where we were holding the press event. This was smoke from the immensely tragic Grenfell Tower fire that occurred on June 14, 2017, claiming the lives of 72 people. We barely made it to the studio, which was approximately 1.5 kilometers away from the disaster site. Naturally, the national media canceled, and the decision was left to me: cancel or proceed. After careful consideration, we decided to launch the appeal anyway. Although it was painful to hold the press conference so close to the disaster site, the physical location from which the press conference was delivered had no relation with the content of the message. Moreover, media outlets worldwide were prepared to spread the message. Would it be possible to recreate that momentum a few days later? As harsh as it may sound, in countries outside of England, the Grenfell Tower tragedy would still be news, but there would also be room for our message. So, reluctantly, we went ahead and launched the joint appeal. So what happened next?

At first, not much. I even thought something was wrong, but it turned out that due to the rise of fake news, the news channels wanted to fact-check the message first. After hours of waiting, it finally gained traction. Several hundred million people received the message, and more importantly, the message was embraced and put into practice by numerous local faith communities. The real impact is difficult to measure, but my confidence grew through chance encounters, such as meeting a German social studies teacher, who enthusiastically shared how she discussed it in her high school class after seeing it on the German TV news. We also received numerous enthusiastic responses and saw countless social media posts. However, the most extraordinary surprise might have been the *golden UN/RFBF Peace Medal* we were awarded in Seoul, by none other than Ban Ki-moon.

The appeal

This was the essence of the appeal, and, of course, it can be viewed at letsheal.org/book. And although a few years old, it is still very relevant today.

World's Most Prominent Religious Leaders Make Historical Joint Appeal to Everyone:

“MAKE FRIENDS ACROSS RELIGIONS”

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I – Grand Mufti Shawki Allam – Pope Francis – H.H. the Dalai Lama – Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks – Ayatollah Sayyid Fadhel Al-Milani – Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh – Mata Amritanandamayi (Amma) – Archbishop Justin Welby – Sri Sri Ravi Shankar – Archbishop Antje Jackelén – Ayatollah Sayyid Hassan Al-Qazwini – Rabbi Abraham Skorka – Ven. Khandro Rinpoche

The most prominent leaders of the world's major religions released a joint appeal today calling on the people of the world to unify and make friends across religions. The statement is intended to reduce social tension around the world by stimulating interpersonal contact between people of different faiths. It was made by Pope Francis, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, H.H. the Dalai Lama, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and many others.

Each of the leaders contributed a personal statement for the exclusive purpose of creating this joint appeal. Ayatollah Al-Milani advises people to make friends with followers of all religions. Patriarch Bartholomew calls on the world to “*recognize the beauty of God in every living human being*”. Pope Francis and Rabbi Abraham Skorka demonstrate how their religious

experiences have been enriched by their interfaith friendship. Grand Mufti of Egypt Shawki Allam stresses not to focus on differences between religious groups. The Dalai Lama calls for a deepening of spiritual friendship. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says *“One of the wonderful things about spending time with people completely unlike you is that you discover how much you have in common. The same fears, hopes and concerns.”* Archbishop of the Church of Sweden, Antje Jackelén stresses the importance for society: *“This should start a process that will take prejudices away and where new insights and hope is born.”* The Archbishop of Canterbury adds that *“It’s not complicated, start with sharing what we all share, which is the pleasure of conversation.”*

And then?

The Sweetie and Make Friends Across Religions projects were two very special and formative endeavors. They have left their marks in many ways, and without these projects, I wouldn’t be writing this book now. You might wonder, what happened next? Well, we continued for some time with religious leaders, this time, we aimed to prioritize climate action through a joint appeal that would be presented in person by the leaders. And that partially succeeded, culminating in an announcement directed at the *26th UN Climate Conference (COP26, November 2021)*, as a result of a gathering at the Vatican, with leaders representing different faiths. Meanwhile at LetsHeal, we undertook two projects that need to stay under the radar—meaning I can’t reveal too much about them at this time. But that doesn’t mean we didn’t learn from these covert projects. I will certainly share some of the insights we gained in the upcoming chapters.

CHAPTER 2

LET'S EXAMINE YOUR CREATIVE BRAIN

I first heard this quote when my friend, the advertising legend Lode Shaeffer, read it out at an awards ceremony. For me, it was a eureka moment:

*“The truly creative mind in any field is no more than this:
A human creature born abnormally, inhumanly sensitive.
To him... a touch is a blow, a sound is a noise, a misfortune is a
tragedy, a joy is an ecstasy, a friend is a lover, a lover is a god,
and failure is death.”* — Pearl S. Buck¹

And I thought, that’s exactly how I feel, as soon as it comes to real problems I want to address, how that feeling can be overwhelming. I thought that evening, maybe those insane issues that I believe creatives can solve are so intense that most creatives, maybe even unconsciously, don’t dare tackle them — as a form of self-protection. And that assumption was reinforced by Dan Brown. He wrote: *“The human mind has a primitive ego defense mechanism that negates all realities that produce too much stress for the brain to handle.”*⁸

Or, as I interpreted it: when creatives are confronted with realities that generate excessive stress, the mind tends to negate or deny those realities. I thought, “Great, I’ve got it! This is it.

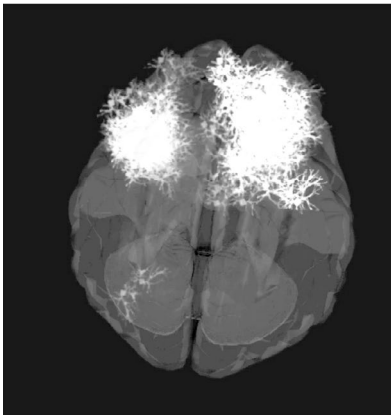
I know what I have to do. I need to ensure that creatives don't put their protective shields up, so they can instead use their talent for good."

Two costly and intensive research studies later, I now understand that my initial assumption wasn't entirely accurate; it's a bit different, but certainly equally fascinating. It turns out that the risk of creatives becoming overwhelmed is inherent to their differently functioning brain, but they are also able to fully engage and step into problem-solving, so they definitely do not put their shields up. If you jump to a few pages further, you'll see a helpful image that clarifies everything at once. And the other research, the quantitative study, also revealed something unexpected and significant. Namely, that a large majority of creatives struggle to translate their world-improving ideas into a concrete intervention. And it seems that the main cause lies in difficulty connecting with other groups. In short, there's a lot to gain. I hope that the insights from the two studies, and the practical tips and tricks in Chapter 3 will help you to make the necessary impact.

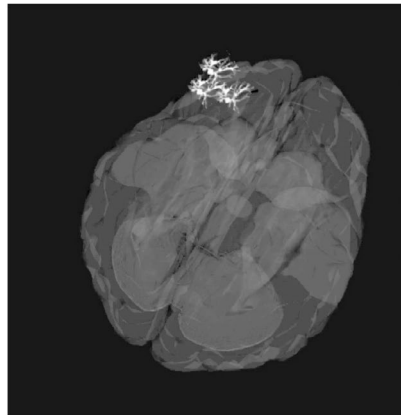
The first research I commissioned, was a brain study on the coping strategies of creatives. The expected outcome was that they would quickly raise their defenses when confronted with intense issues. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Note, I am by no means a neuroscientist, so I rely entirely on the expertise of Roderick Reichbach and Prof. Dr. Mattie Tops. For this experiment, nine participants were selected and recruited based on the criteria that they are considered creative by the public (the participants were all winners of Cannes Lions Awards — creatives with whom I had no prior connection and who graciously lent their brains to us, both male and female). Additionally, eight *non-creatives* (representative of the 'average'

society) were recruited. Their brains were analyzed using an Electroencephalogram (EEG), a method that detects naturally occurring electric charges in the brain while being exposed to specific stimuli. EEG is a painless and non-invasive method. Of course, there are more details to it, and for that reason, I included the first page of the case study in this book (Appendix A – Case Study, The differences in emotional responses, neurological responses, and coping styles between creative individuals and a baseline group). The full case study can be downloaded from letsheal.org/book. Simply put, we observed the brain activity when the participants were exposed to stressful images. Although the study is quite standardized, to our knowledge, it has never been previously employed to reveal stress-induced differences between *creatives* and a control group.

And, you can clearly see that these differences exist, in the image below. A composite representation of the EEG results per group.



Neurological responses 'Creatives'



Neurological responses 'Baseline group'

On the left, you see the brain activity of the creatives, and on the right, that of the control group. It is also clear to a non-specialist that the differences are significant. To be more precise in the researchers' wording: *"In addition to generally stronger activity of alpha waves in the right hemisphere among creatives compared to the control group, there is notably stronger brain activity in alpha waves in the T8 area. This area represents the right temporal lobe, often associated with processing, storing, and retrieving information. In the control group, there is clearly much less strong activity in alpha waves during a stressful event."*

So contrary to my assumption that the shutters close, there is no such thing; the creative's shutters swing wide open. What I have learned from this study is that creatives possess a high absorption level. They demonstrate a heightened level of engagement and focus, wherein an individual becomes fully engrossed in their thoughts, sensations, or the task at hand. What you can observe is the creative fervently attempting to resolve the issue, which is, of course, a strength of the creative mind. If we delve into coping strategies, one could say that they take active steps to address and reduce the impact of the stressor.

In response to stressful situations, the tested creatives shared that they gather information about the problem and seek assistance or advice from others. In terms of avoidance, they score low, suggesting a tendency to set aside other projects to avoid distraction, potentially impacting their daily life as other work may fall behind, creating new stressors. Additionally, with such high absorption levels, protection can be beneficial when diving into stressful situations with an open mind, as even these renowned creatives from the test group can become overwhelmed. In Chapter 3, I will share some tips and tricks to avoid getting completely overwhelmed.

And as delighted as I was with this insight, I felt there was more to explore. The small group of creatives that I had the privilege to subject to the EEG scanner, was a cohort that had already made a significant mark, and it seemed, apart from the risk of becoming overwhelmed, they weren't really in the danger zone. Their coping mechanism was evident: an extreme focus on problem-solving and seeking information from others.

But what about all those hundreds, perhaps thousands, of young creatives, creative students, social entrepreneurs, and activists I have had the opportunity to speak with over the past years? They all identified with the sensitivity described by Pearl S. Buck, displaying a high level of absorption and not putting up their protective shields. They confided in me, expressing sentiments such as:

“What’s the point of it all anymore?”

“I feel so lonely, desperate and depressed.”

“It has to change, but I don’t know how anymore.”

“I can’t sleep anymore.”

I felt their pain and concerns, realizing that relying solely on giving a few tips to prevent feeling overwhelmed, as suggested by the initial brain research, wouldn't be enough. There had to be more to it. I have come across concerning reports about the mental health of young people in general ⁹, and while preparing research questions for the quantitative research, I also discovered a troubling trend among social entrepreneurs in a 2018 study: 50% reported struggling with burnout and depression. ¹⁰ However, I believed it was time to investigate further and connect with a larger number of creatives. To uncover who *The Creatives* truly are, determine their actual numbers, understand their

worries and challenges, and, most importantly, explore whether we can discover something to assist them in becoming and/or remaining creative under fire.

With these broad questions in hand, I headed, as is often the case when I have a hunch but no clear vision, to the Amsterdam-based international research agency Glocalities. My friend and research director, Martijn Lampert, delved into it and not only could he provide answers to the questions, but, above all, he uncovered a significant insight within the vast amount of data collected from 450,000 respondents across 63 countries.

It's a fundamental insight that can help up to 80% of creatives to stay mentally resilient to varying degrees, struggle less, and make more impact. So, there you have your cliffhanger. The insight wasn't immediately evident in the previous brain research because this group of award-winning creatives had already discovered some solutions to navigate stressful issues.

I thought it would be nice to walk through the research in an interview style. I'll swiftly cover a set of questions with concisely formulated answers, and naturally, we'll arrive at the more fundamental insight I promised. Additionally, I've produced a more detailed video about this research, which you can find at letsheal.org/book.

The first question is about who *The Creatives* actually are and how large this group is. It's quite a complex question because every person is naturally creative, resourceful, and solution-oriented, as that is what makes us human. If that were the case, this book would be interesting for everyone, but it probably isn't. Personally, I find it a reliable indicator if you recognize yourself in Pearl S. Buck's poem, but that could also apply to highly sensitive individuals who aren't necessarily creatives. Fortunately, Martijn

Lampert from the research agency had a good solution. We let the respondents determine it themselves. One of the instruments in the Glocalities research program is a segmentation that consists of five values segments: Creatives, Achievers, Challengers, Socializers, and Conservatives. This segmentation helps to understand people's behavior and attitudes.

Who are the Creatives and what is the size of this group?

“Based on our research in 63 countries and more than 450,000 completed surveys, 22% of people belong to the values segment of Creatives.

Creatives are open-minded idealists who prioritize self-development and culture. The segmentation is based on a comprehensive set of statements measuring people's values and outlook on life. Creatives embrace diversity, are flexible regarding gender roles, and reject the notion that the father should be the head of the household. They have a penchant for exploring new things and express their creativity through activities such as drawing, painting, writing, singing, playing musical instruments, and a strong interest in the arts. This values segment is particularly significant in Europe. While present in Asia and Africa, the Creatives segment is smaller, influenced by the more collectivistic and patriarchal values in those cultures. Economic development also plays a role, as individuals focused on survival may have less time and resources for self-actualization and pursue deeper life missions beyond immediate needs for themselves and their families.” — Martijn Lampert

I hadn't expected that such a large percentage of the adult world population would belong to values segment of *The Creatives*, but it is hopeful. If these hundreds of millions of people were to use their talents for good, there is significant potential there. However, let me not dream too big and, with this book, focus

primarily on the tens of millions of creatives working in the creative industry, social entrepreneurs, students in this field, and of course, activists. Also, not exactly a small group.

So, what follows, are my questions and Martijn's insightful answers...

Q: What are the demographic backgrounds of the Creatives?

A. “Creatives are present in all age groups. However, they are more frequently either single or living as a couple. They are less inclined to have children, or be married. We observe a slightly higher proportion of females than males in this segment, but the difference is not substantial.”

Q: What are the topics that Creatives are worried about?

A. “Creatives express the highest concerns about Climate Change (54%) and human rights violations (48%), followed by child abuse and neglect (45%), extreme poverty (43%), the gap between the rich and the poor (42%), and sexual harassment and abuse (40%). Their concerns span social, economic, and environmental issues. It is essential to note that these concerns also rank high among the general population, presenting opportunities for Creatives to connect with other segments in society. Previous Glocalities research has indicated that concerns about human-caused damage to the planet transcend the polarization between conservatives and progressives. Worries about environmental harm unite people from all walks of life.”

Q: Could you provide a more in-depth focus on Creatives, particularly regarding their relationship with imagination—a pivotal capability essential for overcoming challenges?

A.“Creatives value imagination more than others do, seeing it as a crucial tool for envisioning new solutions and a better world. Imagination, a vital human faculty, is something they are particularly attuned to. Change indeed begins with the imagination; however, it alone is not sufficient. While it serves as their strength, it can also become a pitfall. Allow me to elaborate further. Examining archetypes, which are universal narratives in storytelling, creatives resonate most with the rebel, explorer, and creator archetypes. This inclination makes them innovative and visionary thinkers who go beyond conventional boundaries. Their ideas and imaginative concepts play a vital role in tackling challenges, and their activism reflects a commitment to surpassing the status quo. However, to truly make a difference and instigate change, these ideas must be embraced, implemented, and materialized by others. This process is far from easy. The creative vision must be translated into solutions that resonate with larger, international societal groups beyond the creative community. Creatives must connect with the expansive and innovative value segments of challengers and achievers—individuals who proactively achieve goals and can effectively engage more conservative segments of society. When the bridge between creativity and ambition is established, the momentum for positive change on a global scale will be significant. To initiate all of this, creatives must transcend limitations and actively challenge themselves.”

Q: Can you elaborate a bit more? How can we create this connection between groups and combine these qualities for a better world?

A: “To address this question in our data, I explored the specific sub-segment of creatives that particularly enjoy introducing individuals from diverse backgrounds to one another—the Creative Connectors. Approximately one in five creatives fall into this category, embodying individuals with the ability to actively connect people from various networks.

I compared them with creatives who are least inclined to connect people from different backgrounds, and what I found is interesting. The Creative Connectors are more focused on sharing, open towards people with different opinions and worldviews, and tend to be more outgoing and risk-taking. They actively enjoy solving problems, being proactive, and setting things in motion. They embody idealist doers. Creative Connectors are notably less pessimistic and less likely to feel let down by society than creatives who adhere to the same vision and ideals, but are less focused on connecting and working with people from different backgrounds to take on challenges. Providing a precise percentage for the reduction in pessimism and diminished feelings of societal letdown within the Creative Connectors group is tricky due to response patterns influenced by cultural factors. However, what I can say is that the difference is statistically significant.”¹¹

It is intriguing to note that Creatives who score high on interpersonal connection not only exhibit a generally positive mindset, but also perceive their own future mental health optimistically. Specifically, 35% anticipate an

improvement, 46% believe it will remain unchanged and 19% expect a decline. I believe these insights are a crucial key for igniting change, because these creative connectors can and need to play a significant role in mobilizing larger groups in society to realize their ideals. The trap is that, because creatives generally score high in their focus on imagination and ideals, there is also the risk of staying in your head only, without actually connecting with people with different qualities to set the changes in motion. This is why diversity in teams is so important to achieve goals.

Creatives score in general higher on imagination.¹² This underscores once again that it is important for creatives to connect with other groups in teams to get things done, as the visionary aspect of creatives (and their imagination) is important and unique. However, to realize ideals and dreams, diverse teams and combinations (including people with different value patterns, leadership styles, and qualities) are crucial. Otherwise, polarization is also a risk (especially in the era of echo chambers we live in now), which can be counterproductive in achieving ideals. This is a major field for development and also the reason why in our research we focus a lot on leadership development and leadership styles. We can only realize a sustainable future if we get people with different values and talents on board to contribute and make a difference together.”

In short

Perhaps your thoughts wandered a bit after reading all that research talk, but I believe it forms the perfect foundation for tips on becoming and/or remaining creative under fire. In short, our

initial research showed that brain activity, and absorption, are much higher in creatives than in the control group. The protective shields are not put up, as I assumed, but stay down. The risk here is that the creative becomes so engrossed that it overwhelms and makes no impact, or it comes at the expense of themselves.

From the second study, a pivotal insight emerged. Creatives, comprising 22% of the population, possess a high level of imagination. However, to translate this imagination into tangible action, collaboration with people unlike them is essential. Creatives often keep their ideas confined to their minds, hindering the potential for those ideas to flourish. The relatively small subset that does connect best with other groups, known as the Creative Connectors (20%), exhibits significantly more positivity, happiness, and fewer mental problems. This is largely because they are more adept at realizing their ideas. On the flip side, 80% of creatives do not, or to a lesser extent, engage in such collaboration and consequently struggle more with various challenges.

This statistic was surprising to me, as I unequivocally belong to the group of Creative Connectors. I realized early on that I couldn't achieve my dreams alone, and I can empathize with the frustration and stress that arises when one can't bring their ideas to fruition. In the next chapter, I will therefore provide some tips on breaking out of your bubble, winning over others for your ideas, and thereby enhancing the likelihood of success. Stepping out of the safe confines of your mind, sharing your cherished ideas, making yourself vulnerable, becoming a creative connector, and forging connections, may seem daunting. However, trust me, you'll be pleasantly surprised at how eager others are to collaborate because they share the same worries and

dreams. Connecting with people unlike yourself will not only enhance your chances of making an impact but also ultimately contribute to your happiness. And with 80% of creatives finding this challenging to varying degrees, you are certainly not alone. Onwards and upwards.

CHAPTER 3

THE TIPS & TRICKS

Now that we've explored the workings of the creative brain, it's time to introduce some tips and tricks that will help us stay sane while tackling challenging problems.

Tip 1— Get Outta Your Dreams

Tip 2— Where to Start?

Tip 3— Small is Great

Tip 4— The Switch by HH The Dalai Lama

Tip 5— Safe Spaces

Tip 6— War is Work

Tip 7— Money No Issue

Tip 8— Body Priority

Tip 9— Have No Mercy; Kill Your Darlings

Tip 10— Where's the Hope?

TIP 1 GET OUTTA YOUR DREAMS

In the previous chapter, we discovered that up to 80% of creative individuals struggle to connect with people of different personality types, such as achievers or go-getters. This insight is crucial because translating your brilliant idea into an actual project often requires collaboration with people who bring diverse skills and perspectives. Attempting to realize your world-changing project alone or solely with like-minded individuals is unlikely to succeed. Keeping your idea confined to your thoughts for too long is detrimental. It can lead to stress, frustration, and struggles, as shown by the research in Chapter 2. I hope this realization encourages you to share your transformative idea. Don't keep it to yourself—share it with others without setting too many expectations. Let it be known everywhere, not necessarily with the anticipation that others will immediately assist you, but rather to invite critical thinking and collaboration. If you're working with creatives, remember there could be many great ideas waiting to be shared. But unless you ask, you might never hear them. So please, don't hesitate to ask and empower all those untapped potential world-healing ideas to make their impact.

Let's connect

If the above resonates with you, you likely require more than just the realization to begin connecting with individuals who hold different perspectives. Actively sharing your ideas poses its own set of challenges, and you are not alone; the majority of your creative peers can also find it difficult. Imagine the wealth of brilliant ideas within those minds, possibly never brought

to fruition. Creative minds are safe havens where one exciting idea after another emerges, a delightful place where anything is possible. As the now 90-year-old and still actively working advertising legend Jacques Séguéla, the ‘S’ in Euro RSCG, one of France’s most revered and outspoken creative figures, shared with me in relation to this project: “I cultivate my dreams every day. A day without a dream is a day without bread.”

I understand how difficult it is to leave that warm, familiar, and above all safe environment of your imagination. But we have to if we want to make this world a better place. Let me help you better connect with others who are crucial to making your vision a reality.

First, let’s confront the worst-case scenario: facing laughter and a lukewarm reception for your idea after sharing it. I’ve been through it more than once. Earlier, I referred to Pearl S. Buck’s “Failure is death” quote for a reason. Seeing your idea being rejected is tough. However, I still believe you should pursue it. Firstly, because the less positive reaction may have valid reasons. It could very well be that your idea simply isn’t good enough yet. Listen carefully to what others tell you, take their input home, and enhance your idea if possible. And secondly, continuously dwelling on a less promising idea is wasteful. (Also, consider reading Chapter 3, Tip 9, Have No Mercy; Kill Your Darlings). If you can bid farewell to an initially fantastic idea that didn’t pan out, it may feel disheartening at first, but creates space for a new flow of ideas. As a creative, you might lack many things, but your ideas keep flowing. Despite the possible pain, always embrace the risk of discomfort and reach out.

Don’t wait for someone to specifically request your idea. The odds of stumbling on a client in search of precisely what you’re offering can be slim. In essence, you’ll likely need to take the initiative yourself. Recognize that the outside world won’t

magically know about your fantastic idea. To reiterate, I firmly believe that, as creatives, we bear a moral duty to try and bring world-improving ideas to life, and sharing is a pivotal part of that process. In my view, stashing away world-improving ideas should practically be deemed a creative felony. However, as it isn't considered a crime yet, let me present it more inspiringly: The world needs you! So, speak up and reach out.

You will be welcomed

When you do find the courage to share your idea, you'll notice something extraordinary happening. You'll see that your idea is rarely shot down. Instead, what you'll observe is that others are grateful that you've entrusted them with your precious idea. This also goes for famous people and people you might look up to. Don't be shy. In the research, we've seen that they share concerns about the same things and are eager to help. They're waiting for you! Because without your imagination, your creativity, there is no project. They have their talent, and you have yours—you bring the peanut butter, and they bring the bread. Make sure you know what you're best at, and especially what you're not as good at, and then seek out the best potential team members. I know in my heart of hearts, without the generous help of the many experts outside my creative bubble, the projects I shared with you earlier in this book would never have been realized.

Now, I completely understand that if you haven't experienced this yet, you might be thinking, "Well, you have no trouble with it; you're one of those Creative Connectors who find it effortless." Well, it's true—I've been fortunate from a young age to experience how much others enjoy it when you share your ideas and how willingly they help bring them to life.

Let me share one example from my childhood. I was ten years old, and I wanted a BMX track in my quiet village where there was little to do. So, I asked my mom, “How can I make that happen?” She didn’t wave me away, but instead said, “Go talk to the councilor.” He lived across the street, so I rang his doorbell and asked, “I want a BMX track for my friends. How do I make it happen?” The councilor replied, “What a great idea! If you can show me that more kids in the village want it, we’ll go to the mayor together.” So, I quickly gathered signatures and supporters from the two primary schools in the village. I had no real idea what a BMX track should look like, but a friend of mine did. A week later, we presented our idea and a drawing to the mayor, who said, “Excellent! I know a place, and I’ll make sure the materials come if you arrange the manpower.” And voila, a few weeks later, the BMX track was open!

This is an experience I wish for everyone at a young age, because it helps you realize that sharing a good idea isn’t nagging, but rather, people are happy to help. Try passing on that feeling to your (future) kids—it makes life a lot easier.

Now I’ll try to support you just like my mom did for me.

Let’s make connecting a bit easier

First recognize that this is a challenge for you. Share it with the people you trust and like, and there’s a good chance you’ll find understanding. Even though you are the one who has to take the first step forward and connect, knowing you’re not the only one grappling with it can hopefully make it a bit more bearable. Perhaps, something similar to Alcoholics Anonymous, you could initiate a support group with fellow creatives facing the same challenge. Practice and be there for each other in reaching

out beyond your usual circle. Even better, why not turn this challenge of reaching out into a truly creative project? Especially for creators, realizing a small segment of the bigger plan can be very helpful in engaging various audiences and facilitating easier connections. So, don't wait; create.

And if you decide to go for it and reach out, don't go all in right away; don't ask someone you barely know to support your project for the next few years. That's too big of an ask and might scare people off. What usually works well is asking someone for some concrete advice on a smaller aspect of the bigger idea, so that it feels manageable. It could be technical inquiries, questions about the legal aspects of your idea, or maybe you're seeking information on the scale of the issue. If you approach it with a more narrow scope, you'll find that the other person is happy to respond—it's their area of expertise, after all. And if there's a click, and you can enhance your idea, a connection will naturally develop, and you'll find yourselves more often seeking each other out automatically. They'll be glad you reached out. After doing this a few times, it becomes easier and even more enjoyable. You'll experience how wonderful different perspectives and contributions can be, and how your dream might gradually take shape and become more concrete. Give it a try! What helped me connect with people outside my network is the InMail feature on LinkedIn. Scientists and experts, in particular, are easily accessible and enjoy being approached with thoughtful questions about your shared issue. They are enthusiastic about sharing their knowledge. If you doubt it, test it on me.

By the way, I've observed over the past few years that many, especially younger creatives, find it nerve-wracking to make calls or meet in person. First of all, please bear in mind that the person you're approaching appreciates your call 9 out of 10 times. If cold

calling feels daunting, you can start by sending a text asking if it's okay to reach out, and suggesting a good time to talk. You can also inquire if it's fine to send questions via email, if having a free-flowing conversation feels intimidating. Additionally, you can practice calling strangers. You probably can find a reason to call your insurance agent or telecom provider. And before you know it, you become a pro at small talk and connecting with people from different backgrounds. Small talk, often associated with smooth-talking sales people, might not be your favorite, but it's the lubricant that can be essential to your project's success.

Let's dive in head first

For the daring ones among you, if you truly aspire to be a fearless Creative Connector, here's a hardcore, cold-turkey, crash method—effective for overcoming your fear of reaching out to strangers: try working in a call center, or as a street vendor for a few weeks. It helps you move beyond any shame, especially when you're in a group of people doing exactly what you fear most—they'll support you and share their shameless tips and tricks. Remember, it's for a greater purpose and more cost-effective than a course. And, it will pay off if you dare to give it a try.

I also don't particularly find it easy or enjoyable, but it's just part of the process. One of the shameless phone calls I forced myself to make was for my first book.⁴ I wanted the support of the United Nations, but where to begin? I didn't know anybody within or near the UN, so after sending a few emails and receiving a few rejections, I almost threw in the towel. But then I realized that the massive building in New York is actually made up of countless small rooms. So, I visualized that in each room, there could be someone who might be open to the idea. I found out

that each room had its own phone number extension. Thus, I committed to spending a half hour every day making phone calls, taking on the role of a door-to-door salesman, and incrementing the extension number up after each rejection... and after a few days, I got a positive response. I'm not a mega networker, but keeping the goal in mind, setting aside shame, and going for it made it somewhat more doable.

If all of this still feels like a step too far, if your palms are sweating after reading this text... okay, I get it, it can be nerve-racking. Instead of just asking others for help, you can step forward and offer your support for projects within the same field as your plan. Similar to a player in sports offering themselves to take the ball, make yourself available. But remember, you still need to make yourself heard. Ensure others notice you and understand that you're eager to get involved. Volunteer for brainstorming sessions and contribute to topics that interest you. Open up your LinkedIn and respond to calls from others. Take part in events like hackathons organized by your school, local art directors club, or your workplace. It might seem a bit casual, and the outcomes of such events rarely lead to concrete projects. However, there's an important reason for you to participate: it's a fantastic way to learn how collaborating with different perspectives can take you further than you could ever go alone.

Connecting different groups is important, not just for creatives alone, but also for organizations. Building ties between diverse people within organizations like NGOs, educational institutions, or creative businesses is crucial for impact. And with a few simple adjustments, your organization can make a difference quickly. The initial step is to ensure that everyone is aware of the organization's emphasis on the topic at hand. And then create a secure environment where everyone feels seen, heard, and safe to

share their ideas. As my former Managing Director, Willem van der Schoot, used to say: “Give the floor to those who speak less and are seldom heard.” And he’s absolutely right—still waters run deep. Rituals that help forge connections can also be immensely helpful. In my advertising days, for instance, we gathered the entire team every morning at 9:10. Everyone briefly shared their current tasks and mentioned where they might need assistance. Social events like parties, lunch breaks, and walks were equally important. (More insights on this topic can be found in Chapter 3, Tip 5, Safe Spaces).

The art of staying connected

My long-time friend and collaborator, Dennis van Aalst, excels as a maestro in keeping diverse teams united during the sometimes lengthy duration of our projects. Bringing people with different perspectives together is an art in itself. However, holding a team together to achieve a shared goal is an even greater challenge, and Dennis does it in a way I never could. In a group, he serves as the mediator on the journey towards the goal—every stakeholder can share their thoughts, wishes, and fears, and he acts as the interpreter, ensuring true understanding and protection for each team member. This requires a consistently open, positive, and proactive attitude to delve seriously into others’ perspectives, ensuring everyone’s interests are well-represented in the big picture. It demands patience, not too big of an ego, attentive ears, and perpetual positivity. Having someone with these qualities on your team can turn dreams into reality, and I can’t thank him enough for it. (Please also review his contribution in Chapter 3, Tip 3, Small is Great).

TIP 2 WHERE TO START?

“What, in your opinion, should be my purpose? What issue do you think I should tackle, because I really don’t know...”

Before delving into practical tips on maintaining sanity while addressing complex issues, let’s take a moment to identify the specific issue you want to take on. If you already have a topic in mind, feel free to skip this tip. If not, you’re not alone, as I often receive this question from both students and creative professionals in the workforce.

When I first encountered this question, my initial thought was, “How strange, don’t we all have issues we want to address?” Of course, most of us do; it’s what makes us human. Additionally, the Glocalities research (please see Chapter 2) confirms that creative individuals have no shortage of concerns. The challenge and questions arise from having too many concerns, making it difficult to choose the right one and potentially causing stress, which can impede action.

Picking the right issue to tackle can give meaning to your life. And that’s a fundamental need.¹³ Not having a sense of *purpose* can evoke profound feelings of depression. So, asking the question, “What’s the issue I want to tackle?” is a very valid one. Of course, I can’t tell you which topic to choose, but perhaps I can help guide you a bit in finding the right issue for you.

I strongly suggest selecting only one issue to focus on. In my experience, concentrating on a single problem increases the likelihood of success. Addressing a genuine and significant issue and sharing the solution with the world demands considerable effort. It’s crucial to approach the topic with dedication and passion, so

choosing the right one makes it easier to persevere. It does involve being confronted with a large amount of hardship and there will be many moments of frustration. Finding a working solution is genuinely complex and will require you to step well out of your comfort zone. The average process will, therefore, take much longer and demand a great deal of endurance from you. And, let's be honest, it's not an inconsequential task; if it succeeds, it will make a significant contribution to the world. I hope you agree that embracing one issue at a time is more than sufficient.

Now, let's identify the right problem. And, in a way, the good news is that there are plenty of issues to choose from.

To be honest, I don't find it challenging to decide which issue to address personally. The issues I've taken on over the years seem to have chosen me (please see Chapter 1). The moment I sense an overpowering, almost supernatural, fire in my gut; a blend of anger, energy, determination, love, compassion, and a strong belief that I can and should make a difference—I know I've been touched by an issue designated for me. That feeling is quite overwhelming, an intense emotion for which anything else can and has to be set aside.

If this resonates with you, then selecting your topic shouldn't be too difficult. However, please verify if the issue is already being addressed; you could potentially join those efforts or find another issue. Otherwise, it might be a waste.

I tend to feel that intense fire once every year or so. If you experience this all the time, or never, it might be helpful to select your topic in a somewhat more structured manner. My method is derived from a model that I developed years ago for brands to become more prosocial.¹⁴ It outlines your possible actions, drawing from a combination of your skills, principles, and the matters that are important to you.

Let's find the issue

Even if you discover the answer is something you can do on your own, I recommend doing it in collaboration with someone close to you—someone who genuinely understands you. Consider reaching out to a friend or colleague who truly knows you and appreciates your talents. Most importantly, you must feel completely at ease sharing your deepest feelings with them.

You might feel hesitant to initiate this conversation, and it could be that it's not yet common practice within your school, organization, friend group, or work environment. Nevertheless, don't hesitate to ask; you'll find that people are willing and even honored to assist you with this.

It might take a few hours, but, first and foremost, you have to create a safe setting (please see Chapter 3, Tip 5, Safe Spaces) where you can talk in-depth, also about your frustrations, emotions, and maybe even personal traumas. But if you still find it somewhat intimidating, consider initiating a meaningful conversation during a casual walk during a lunch break or at a café. To add some structure, here are the topics and corresponding questions for you to explore together. We'll start by uncovering your unique talent—that's the first ingredient in the mix. Next, we'll delve into your values which will set the tone for ingredient 3: the issue to be discovered.

Ingredient 1. Your unique talent

Don't hold back. Many creatives tend to be modest about their talents, often because their creativity comes so naturally. Your talent is likely being creative or the ability to work with creatives. Otherwise, why would you have chosen to read this book in the first place? But we have to be more specific here. As for me, my

talent lies not only in creativity, but also in extreme persistence in making it happen. I can dedicate years to a project, sometimes without any noticeable progress. I can also grasp the big picture and reframe it into something very simple, making it easy for news outlets to convey the message (a befriended Columbia University professor complimented me once by saying, “Mark, you are the Sarah Palin¹⁵ of advertising”). Defining your talent is crucial as you aim to make an impact on an important cause. Utilizing your talent to the fullest extent increases the likelihood of making a more significant impact.

Now, what about your talents? If you can’t readily list them, consider seeking feedback from colleagues or friends. How do they describe you? What comes up during performance reviews? Your preferences can also offer valuable insights; while they may not always align perfectly with your talents, they serve as a useful starting point. Additionally, consulting with a career advisor or coach can provide valuable guidance in this process.

If you find it difficult to identify your talent, you can also begin by recognizing what is not your talent. This process can help you define what you don’t want to do, which can be easier to describe. Try to move beyond the common things creative people may dislike, such as mediocrity and bureaucracy, and focus on being more specific. For example, my talent is that I go to great lengths to achieve my goals, and in the process, I may inadvertently hurt others. I am so focused on my objective that I unintentionally harm those around me. I recognized this in myself and learned to collaborate with individuals who can withstand a challenge and are not afraid to occasionally push back. So, what is the downside of your talent?

I don’t want to diminish your talent by only dedicating a few sentences to it; there is, naturally, much more to explore.

Consider writing a few pages about your talent and everything that comes with it.

Now let's get a little more emotional...

Ingredient 2: Your values and beliefs

So, who are you as an individual? Or, as my friend Prof. Kees Klomp (Program Manager, AGENCY! at Windesheim University of Applied Science) likes to phrase it: "Who are you in this world?" Identifying your true values is pivotal in discovering which issue you want to embrace. It has to be authentic; this is not something you replicate from others. This is about you in the most bare-bones version, stripped of all layers. An interesting and practical way to uncover your values is by analyzing your responses to a handful of biographical questions. Alternatively, you can do this with a career counselor, psychologist, or if you're open to exploring a more spiritual approach, a professional aura reading can provide valuable and remarkable insights as well.

The renowned Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) once stated, "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards." Knowing and understanding yourself helps to find what motivates you. Below, you'll find a series of questions. You don't have to tackle them alone, you can engage in this process with individuals you trust and who are familiar with you. The objective is not to fabricate your values, but solely to discover your authentic self. Don't spend too much time contemplating; let the answers flow directly from the heart. There are no wrong answers in this context. Give your responses and save the analysis and discussion for later. Let's begin. Here are the questions:

- **Who do you regard as your heroes, and why?**
The response to this question will assist in describing what type of qualities you value most. Are you drawn to aspects of performance, compassion, transformation, or something else?
- **When were you at your best, and why?**
Was there something you did that now seems completely different from what you're doing now? It's crucial to understand the emotions that guided your actions, rather than to evaluate the success or the effectiveness of your activities.
- **What specifically makes you proud of yourself?**
Work backwards from the feeling of pride to the ambition behind it.
- **What makes you angry? And why?**
Despite being a negative emotion, it can serve as a powerful motivator that drives you. If you want to approach this from another angle, you can ask yourself: what do I dream about? Or if you find yourself unable to sleep: what's keeping me awake? What's my worst nightmare? Or, on a more positive note, if you were to dream positively: what changes would occur in the world if my dreams came true?
- **What makes you happy and thankful? And why?**
Knowing what you really feel gratitude for could serve as a clear indication of the change you wish to realize.
- **What are the causes you donate time or money to? And why?**
Now, I don't want to look into your wallet, but if you are giving to specific causes, it's probably a clear sign of what you care about.

After providing all the answers, identifying a key personal value or belief shouldn't be overly challenging. Try to narrow it down as much as possible; in many cases, one or two words can encapsulate

the essence of your values. If you find this task too difficult for yourself at the moment, try it on someone else first.

Ingredient 3: The issue for you

While the process so far may seem straightforward, here it gets a bit fuzzier. The key here is to merge your passions (ingredient 2) with your skills (ingredient 1) to land on a specific issue. If you've chosen to harness your identified talents and values for positive change, chances are the issue will reveal itself sooner than you think. By keeping ingredients 1 and 2 at the forefront of your mind and maintaining enthusiasm for identifying an issue, you'll be surprised by the outcomes. Don't hesitate to engage with people, preferably also those outside your network. Additionally, invest time in thorough research. I find it extremely useful to explore research reports by journalists in your field of interest; their stories and insights can be truly inspiring.

A word of caution: avoid hastily jumping on the bandwagon. Ensure that the story and problem are genuine and that you can make a significant impact; otherwise, you risk wasting your energy and the potential impact you could have had on another subject. If you have found the issue for you, it is time to capture what you uniquely bring to the table by combining the three ingredients.

Here's your purpose, the mix of your unique ingredients

As we proceed, let's narrow our focus. If you haven't already, try to summarize your talents, values, and chosen causes in a clear statement. While aiming to improve the world creatively is admirable, it's still too broad. So, consider what makes you unique, what matters most to you, and where you believe you can

make a difference. Does the outcome ignite a fire within you? If not, don't worry; the fact that you have the intention to use your talent for good is already a significant step. Give it some time and trust in your creativity. The insights and ideas will emerge.

In my case, though my process was somewhat intuitive, I followed a somewhat similar path. (See Chapter 1 for my personal story on how I decided to fight the world of webcam child sex tourism and how a meeting with a young Muslim led to the Make Friends Across Religions initiative).

Let's conclude this chapter with some additional reflections.

Finding your domain will cause pain.

You need to be moved by the issue you choose, even if it means being temporarily overwhelmed. That's when you know you're on the right track. When delving into the world of solving world problems, expect some pain.

It may be necessary to dismantle some potential barriers you've constructed around yourself as a defense against intense feelings. This coping mechanism is common among many creatives. As my friend, Professor Kees Klomp, expresses it: "Are you willing to ask yourself, 'Who am I in this world?'" This is no small undertaking as you're placing yourself in a vulnerable position, allowing genuine emotions to surface. If you embrace this process, you will inevitably confront pain, fear, anger, and sadness, perhaps even facing burnout or depression. And that's perfectly acceptable, as long as you remain aware of it and, most importantly, don't navigate through it alone. (Please review Chapter 3, Tip 3 Small is Great, to ensure you avoid burnout from day one).

One thing about personal traumas

Nobody lives a life without scars, but don't be deceived. Having experienced trauma, doesn't automatically make you an expert. Yes, you might have felt the pain, learned how to deal with it, or even managed to move beyond it. Or, as my wife and psychologist, Milja Falentijn, says, "If you have undergone a root canal treatment, you are not yet a dental surgeon. You have experienced the pain and the healing as well. But that doesn't make you a medical specialist." So, if you are considering entering a field in which you have personally experienced trauma, exercise caution. I would strongly recommend consulting a psychologist first to ensure that you have enough distance to engage with that specific issue. If other issues align with your purpose, I would recommend choosing those, as it reduces the likelihood of feeling too overwhelmed and increases the chances of success.

Now, are you prepared to bring your purpose to life? It will be both fulfilling and challenging. There's no shame in waiting a few years and honing your skills further to make an even more significant impact down the road. Let's explore some tips and tricks that will help you to stay sane while trying to tackle insane issues. But first I have to express my gratitude here for your intention to contribute to making this world a better place. Thank you!

TIP 3

SMALL IS GREAT

Small is Great might sound a bit strange coming from someone like me, who believes that ideas and projects can never be big enough. Nevertheless, it is one of my core principles. There are a number of reasons why a big idea may never realize its full potential if you can't think and act on a smaller scale.

First and foremost, I believe that this should be the guiding principle for all emerging changemakers. This applies to young creatives, activists, students, and social entrepreneurs with limited experience. I understand the natural inclination to tackle major issues on a large scale. However, without the right experience and skills, you can quickly feel overwhelmed or, worse, lost. You don't have to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders. There's nothing to be ashamed of; in fact, it's quite wise to embrace Small is Great.

It took me a while to truly appreciate the importance of Small is Great. There's a significant risk of burnout from aiming too big, too quickly, without a clear approach. I witnessed it firsthand with young individuals who came to work for me, inspired by the scale of the Sweetie project (please see Chapter 1). Many were eager to join us and tackle other large-scale issues, and I didn't hold them back for a second; quite the opposite. If a young and enthusiastic creative wanted to solve world hunger, I'd say, "Fantastic, go for it!" Oh, and you want to re-green the world? "Absolutely, go ahead." But, as you can imagine, I soon found myself responsible for seven burnouts among these young individuals. Fortunately, they all landed on their feet, but I wish I had set clearer limits. Instead of saying, "Do you want to green the earth? Yes, go for it," I should have encouraged starting small; in their neighborhood,

learning from it, and gradually scaling up. You can't change everything overnight. You need to experiment and figure out what works and what doesn't. Take your time, there's nothing to be ashamed of. The more you learn and try now, the greater the chance that pursuing a grander idea later will succeed. It might suddenly make the project feel more manageable, and you'll gain valuable insights and self-confidence along the way. Scaling might just happen more naturally. Once you start creating, which is something a creative should do as quickly as possible, you attract others inspired by your work who want to join in.

Even though the projects I described in Chapter 1 may seem ambitious, these large initiatives are actually made up of numerous small sub-projects. And that's not by chance. My steadfast LetsHeal ally, Dennis van Aalst, was, among his many remarkable qualities, the wizard behind breaking down these seemingly challenging large projects into small, achievable sub-projects. I always found it somewhat miraculous, seeing such a massive idea transformed into a series of smaller tasks on an Excel sheet, making the project so manageable that it had to succeed. And especially because the projects had a long duration, approximately two years, the subtasks from Dennis' Excel sheet became more and more of an anchor for everyone in the team. Sometimes it felt like there was no end in sight, and that's exactly when such a document becomes incredibly helpful to keep spirits up. Because, no matter how small, it becomes tangible evidence that you are taking steps forward.

And, of course, I also asked Dennis about the art of breaking down such a mega project effectively. His advice is not to have everything minutely described: "Instead, I try to distance myself from the project as much as possible. I aim to wear the hat almost

as an external advisor to the team. I break the large project into, let's say, five core elements. I describe these elements as objectively as possible, from a rational perspective and simplified. While my Excel sheet doesn't do justice to the beauty and impact of the idea, it helps by eliminating any emotion or danger. This allows you to focus on the core of what needs to be done rather than the often challenging subject. In my overview, I make the sub-projects very clinical. For example, in the Sweetie project, the Excel sheet didn't say, 'investigate actual numbers of perpetrators and victims of online child abuse' but 'Research supply/demand'. This way, you remove the emotion from the task list. And suddenly, it feels doable. So, make it small, break it down, and use whatever blueprint system works for you, whether it be Excel, a paper notebook, or Post-it notes, but remove the emotion, and it becomes the anchor for the entire team."

Finally, it's great that the project becomes achievable by breaking it down into small sub-projects, but how do you ensure that these are the right steps?

I like to use something called the Theory of Change, as the roadmap to achieve maximum impact. You can find various templates you can use for your project online. A Theory of Change ensures you take the right steps. It's not something I came up with, but I consistently apply it. Essentially, a Theory of Change compels you to precisely define long-term goals and the intended outcomes of your intervention, describing how the steps will contribute to achieving those goals. It makes the approach very concrete and clear, from the safe dream world to the harsh reality. Of course, you can occasionally deviate from the Theory of Change route along the way — that's perfectly normal. Or even decide not to proceed with the project because you can't clarify

the Theory of Change. It's a painful decision but a wise one (see also Chapter 3, Tip 9 Have No Mercy; Kill Your Darlings).

In Chapter 1, I loosely describe the steps we took within the Sweetie project regarding the Theory of Change, but my advice is to genuinely explore the beauty of a good Theory of Change. There's a wealth of information online so make the most of it; it will spare you a lot of wandering and assist you in creating a more compelling narrative for all stakeholders. And, above all else, increase the likelihood of achieving a more significant impact.

So, once again, break it down into small steps to make it great.

TIP 4

THE SWITCH BY HH THE DALAI LAMA

One of the most valuable tips in this booklet comes from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Years ago, even before getting into the world of religions, I had the chance to ask him a question directly. After the Sweetie project, I was looking for ways to dive into creative interventions without getting too emotionally invested. You know how it goes — sometimes you come across something unsettling, and it gets stuck in your mind and body. You try to push it away, deny it, but it lingers, and it ends up keeping you up all night. You try to step away from the feeling, but it's not that easy. Imagine how great it would be to have a bit more control, right?

I believe, in the long term, having confidence in maintaining a bit of control is essential for being a creative under fire. If you lack that control and become too immersed in a problem or identify too greatly with the distress, solving it becomes much more challenging. But how? Maybe the Dalai Lama could help.

I was given the opportunity to meet him and ask him my question. The night before, I had dinner with the renowned psychologist Dr. Dan Siegel.¹⁶ He was going to share the stage with the Dalai Lama and was incredibly kind to help facilitate our meeting. The following day, His Holiness the Dalai Lama answered my question in a surprisingly practical manner. This, in short, was his response:

“You can train yourself to absorb and release horror. By doing so, you are developing a crucial switch—the one that ensures you remain in control. The key lies in genuinely embracing the horror, but only for a defined period before letting it go.”

And that's what I began doing from that day onward. For a span of three months, every day, I would select a random sad story from the newspaper, attempting to empathize with the pain and brainstorm solutions, all while the kitchen timer ticked away for ten minutes. Of course, you don't find a solution in ten minutes, but when the timer goes off, you **MUST** set the newspaper aside and continue with your other activities.

At first, it's terribly unsatisfying because you want to come up with a solution. However, after a while, you realize that you've actually developed a switch. You consciously step into the problem and consciously step out, and that helps tremendously.

Train your switch! It really makes a difference.

And credit where credit is due, thanks to this surprising, practical, and especially helpful tip from His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Dr. Dan Siegel, I started to see creativity under fire more and more as a subject to learn about and share.

TIP 5

SAFE SPACES

When you read management literature, safe spaces in a work environment are primarily about ensuring that no one will be punished or judged for sharing feedback, questions, or concerns. Well, that should be an absolute minimum, shouldn't it? Having a safe space is crucial for the success of your creative intervention.

Safety first

Firstly, ensure maximum physical safety for your team. In the cases from Chapter 1, we achieved this primarily by having our interventions go through a proxy for external communication. This meant that we were not the direct sender, but rather it was a charitable cause better equipped to handle follow-ups and security measures. In another instance, I had the emergency contact of the intelligence agency, ensuring a quick evacuation of my office, if necessary. Fortunately, we never had to call on them, but simply having the direct connection made our regard for the team's safety and well-being felt. This was a significant and underestimated side effect.

State of mind

A safe space extends beyond mere physicality. While having a designated area, akin to a clubhouse, can be helpful, it's primarily about cultivating a mindset where everyone in the team feels listened to, supported, and acknowledged. In this environment, everyone should feel both seen and free to contribute ideas to enhance the project. Keep it as inclusive as possible, minimizing

hierarchy. Encourage open and non-judgmental discussions about fears and challenges, check in on each other's well-being, and explore potential practical improvements to the project. Leading by example is crucial — the team leader should also share their fears and challenges during the intervention process. A safe space isn't something you simply impose; it's something you build together. The first step in creating such an environment is collectively determining what it means to have a safe space at all. From the management's perspective, it's essential to fully respect the safe space and allow it all the freedom possible, which means giving and receiving a lot of trust.

This kind of environment is incredibly valuable. Ensure everyone, even those who prefer not to speak, feels heard and protected. Most importantly, emphasize that anyone can participate or step back from the project, without facing any consequences.

In the passage above, the team and the project were already established. If that's not the case yet, the concept of safe spaces remains relevant, but should be more focused on facilitating connections between creative individuals and those with different personality types. (Please refer to Chapter 3, Tip 1, Get Outta of Your Dreams, for more details on establishing these connections.)

TIP 6 WAR IS WORK

With the Creative Under Fire project, my focus is on those who, like me, have the privilege to operate from a safe environment and choose to address an issue. While dealing with such issues can be stressful, nothing compares to the challenges faced by creatives literally under fire in dangerous situations. How do they keep functioning? How do they cope with immense stress? I've spoken to creatives in war zones, military personnel, and the in-house psychologist of my favorite organization, Médecins Sans Frontières – Doctors Without Borders, to draw valuable lessons from their experiences.

To get straight to the point, one of the most inspiring tips, which I immediately took to heart, came from a close friend who, a few years ago, was working as a creative in a dangerous war zone. He worked tirelessly, occasionally falling asleep at his computer, waking up, and continuing without rest. After three months, overwhelmed, he approached his commanding general, expressing fear of burnout. The general shared these insightful words:

“War is work. You can’t operate under high tension day in and day out, even in a war situation. No one can sustain that long-term. You should try to see even war as a job, a 9-to-5. Stop on time, and try to engage in somewhat more ordinary activities.”

I found this incredibly inspiring. If they could treat such an intense situation as a job, surely I could apply that in my safe environment. It's fascinating how creative individuals in those situations found joy in having a laser-like focus on one big goal,

where everything seemed achievable and no idea was too wild. But, I get that there's a downside too. It might start feeling like what you're doing for the cause is never quite up to par, given the enormity of the task.

I'm also grateful to Kaz de Jong, mental health advisor at Médecins Sans Frontières,¹⁷ for taking the time amidst the refugee crisis to share insights from the field. The aim was to learn from an organization whose core business is emergency aid, with doctors providing assistance under the most challenging conditions. I sought to understand how MSF maintains the well-being of its staff. He cited a regularly occurring example of a doctor working tirelessly for days in extreme heat, assisting patients under dire conditions, from sunrise to sunset without proper breaks. The doctor is overwhelmed, reaches their limit, but feels unable to give up. The on-site manager will typically help them see that, without taking care of themselves, they'll no longer be able to help others. They can continue helping some now, but if they stop, they may complete their entire mission and assist even more people. Addressing the specific goal that MSF employees work towards is a way to make them realize they need to take a step back and prioritize self-care. Triage and separating severe from less severe cases, is then provided to facilitate the doctor's step back.

However, more is required to operate under fire for an extended period of time. Even when you see it as work, it remains challenging. Therefore, having a purpose and knowing why you do it is the most crucial aspect to persevere.

Another crucial guideline applied in the military and also at MSF is the R&R principle, which stands for Rest and Recuperation. It emphasizes the mandatory practice of taking breaks, usually

after 2 or 3 months, from the operation to recharge and recover. Occasionally bringing in new members is also effective. This helps create a renewed outlook within the team essential for long-term effectiveness.

In addition to the guiding principles mentioned above, it's crucial to be attentive to certain signals. More than just an attentive supervisor is necessary, it's the responsibility of all team members to look out for each other. A designated confidant can play a crucial role in this regard.

Firstly, if someone insists they are irreplaceable, it's best to take them out of the operation because, in reality, no one is truly indispensable. The same applies when there is complete indifference from a team member.

Another significant signal is when someone resorts to extreme coping mechanisms, such as excessive alcohol or drug use. It's essential to promptly remove them from the operation. This also applies to cases of physical or verbal violence. Immediate intervention is necessary to safeguard the operation.

Also, pay attention to those who never complain or make noise; they may not readily share their deepest feelings. Look for slightly indirect ways to discuss someone's well-being. Take a stroll and inquire about their sleep. Ask, "Are you sleeping well?"

As a final tip, celebrate the smallest successes. In challenging conditions, when the ultimate goal seems far off, actively acknowledge and celebrate interim achievements for a morale boost. This is logical, but often forgotten in the heat of the battle.

TIP 7

MONEY NO ISSUE

“What a fantastic idea, what’s holding you back? Well, I don’t have the money to execute it.”

I’ve heard it so often: creatives hesitate to pursue their idea to make the world a bit better, citing the lack of money, or a budget. Of course, it could be that the idea isn’t strong enough to secure a budget, but more often than not, it turns out that there hasn’t even been a genuine attempt to seek funding. So what’s going on here?

It’s nothing to be ashamed of if you don’t have the money yourself, especially when operating in an impoverished country. However, financial concerns are also prevalent in more developed economies. In fact, a previous LetsHeal study⁸ among residents of the largest economies revealed that the lack of funds was the primary reason for not doing more for others, alongside constraints of time, energy, and ideas. However, when it comes to creatives and their struggle to finance their impactful ideas, there’s more to the story than simply lacking funds. Over the years, I have seen many creatives who have a difficult and stressful relationship with money, and I think it’s worth checking your relationship and, if necessary, improving it. An unhealthy money relationship can hinder your ability to attract funds for your idea to make this world a better place and can cause stress even before the real work has started. Let’s dive into the money talk, because, whether it’s your thing or not, money is a conversation we can’t avoid.

Even if your world-bettering idea garners support from various parties and individuals willing to donate their time, goods, or services for free, they will inevitably need to keep track of their

investment. So, some form of a financial record will be created, leaving you with the urge to pay off the debt at some point. Even if you're in the luxurious position of working on a paid world-improving project, money can still cause considerable stress. It's essential to be cautious and not generalize, but I've observed numerous creatives with potentially great ideas struggle with a strained relationship with money.

If that resonates with you, are you open to acknowledging your challenging relationship with money? If so, let's explore ways to make a positive shift. For the record, I'm not a finance expert; I've faced more setbacks than successes in securing funding for my projects. Nevertheless, I believe in Richard Bach's¹⁹ saying that you can teach best what you most need to learn, and I hope it holds true in this context as well.

Let's try reducing stress by getting at the source of your challenging relationship with money. I've gathered a few possible reasons and am optimistic about getting them out of the way. After that, I will provide some practical guidelines that could assist in attracting funding as a creative.

Possible sources of a difficult relationship with money

Broadly speaking, the unhealthy relationship may find its origin in the fact that, in our capitalist society, there is an overemphasis on money. Creatives may grapple with putting a price on their creative idea, valuing the intrinsic worth of their work over its market value. Or one step further, you may see money as dirty and the root of all evil.

Alternatively, your challenging relationship with money may stem from personal experiences of navigating the gig economy, which is often accompanied by uncertainty and stress in making

ends meet. Plenty of ideas, but a scarcity of funds, is likely a familiar situation. Envisioning a world-bettering project, especially one of considerable scale and longer duration, may prove difficult.

Or, you might feel restricted in your artistic freedom because you believe that the one who pays also dictates. As soon as money from others is involved, the creative spontaneity disappears, and performance becomes a necessity.

Or, due to dyslexia/dyscalculia, which is more common among creative individuals, you may have the notion that you should steer clear of anything related to money.

Or, I've come across another intriguing possible explanation on a deeper psychological level: there might be societal expectations or stereotypes associating the pursuit of art with financial instability. This can create a self-fulfilling prophecy where creative individuals internalize these expectations.

Or, what is also a possibility is that creative people often find satisfaction in the idea itself rather than in the actual realization of the idea, thereby avoiding the stress of bringing the project to life. Or, phrased more negatively: "If I had the money, I'd have to actually execute it. If it stays an idea, it can't fail."

Or, an insecurity I have frequently observed among creatives: "Who am I to believe that my idea could attract funding?"

Or, you want to avoid the situation where a budget is not allocated, which can feel like a personal rejection to the depths of one's soul, leading to feelings of failure ... and we, creatives, know how that feels: Failure is death.¹

If you find yourself nodding along with some of the points mentioned above, I'd suggest that it's high time to nurture a better relationship with money. Imagine if a handful of limiting beliefs stood between you and making a positive impact—that would be a shame, right? While some of these beliefs may have a hint of

truth and will always prove challenging for creatives, I genuinely believe we can overcome at least a few of them. Let's clear the path to attract funding.

Let's debunk your limiting beliefs

My motto is: "Money No Issue". I refuse to be held back by any limiting beliefs about attracting finances for my projects. And I hope you'll do the same. I adopted this belief long before I was lucky enough to sell my agency, even when I didn't have a penny and was still trying to make the world better through creativity. I didn't exactly inherit it from my family. We weren't poor, but we certainly weren't rich. I borrowed the: "Money No Issue" belief from a classmate who, overnight, went from somewhat modest means to wealth because his mother found a rich partner. From that moment, my classmate had a credit card at his disposal, and suddenly, money wasn't a concern anymore. "Money No Issue" was his go-to phrase at the bar. The funny thing is, as a person, he didn't change at all; he didn't do different things, didn't buy fancy clothes or more rounds of drinks, didn't distance himself from us, his broke student friends. The only thing that changed for him was the idea that money was not a problem. So, I decided to copy his attitude, his state of mind. It is very liberating when you believe that money is not an issue. Of course, I've also experienced in my life that a lack of money can indeed lead to problems. I don't mean to suggest you should spend recklessly as if there's no tomorrow.

Money No Issue, for me, is the starting point of my relationship with money, meaning that fundamentally, it's not a problem. And I wish more people would have this empowering belief because it

makes life a lot easier. How does it feel when you confidently say, “Money No Issue”? Give it a try with friends at the pub next time you pick up the tab.

Perhaps adopting that foundational attitude right away is a step too far; let’s first explore which of the above limiting beliefs resonate with you and see if we can transform them into something positive. It requires a bit of imagination, but hey, if any group possesses that, it’s certainly creatives. Consider how you can personally change your relationship with money. Make it your own; maybe even turn it into a creative project. Then, money and attracting funds might even become an enjoyable topic. By the way, I’d love to prove that someday, but it’s currently beyond the scope of this book.

Is your idea worth anything? You possess an abundance of creativity. If there’s anything not scarce, it’s your wealth of ideas. However, realize that what comes naturally to you may not be the same for potential financiers. They might have an abundance of money, but probably lack an overflow of creative ideas. Your gift is something incredible, something magical, scarce, and therefore valuable to them. And one of the ways for people to express their gratitude, or how they value you, is via money. It’s entirely possible that the people you’re trying to secure funding from have a limiting belief when it comes to their own creativity for a better world. In this scenario, you’re helping them just as much as they’re helping you.

Let’s also flip the *money is evil* notion. In essence, it’s the use that can be evil, not the money per se. Yes, money can be used for terrible things, or have its origin in dark sources, but it’s not the money itself that’s evil; it’s what it gets converted into. Your world-improving plans transform money into something potentially heavenly. Does that help?

Now, let's examine the limiting belief that the financier dictates. You may have encountered this in your commercial advertising projects. But here's the deal: in this case, the person with the purse strings is on your team, just as keen as you to make things happen and improve the world. And, a smart financier can be a helpful ally, sharing their contacts and tips from past successful projects. It's not meddling; it's valuable advice you should welcome. The tension you might be feeling is likely more about your uncertainty regarding whether you dare to truly take charge of your project and handle the risk of it not going perfectly. Do you have the courage for that?

Breaking down the toughest limiting belief is a real challenge: the one that says: "*failure is death*", especially when many creatives find satisfaction in just their creative idea itself. If we weren't talking about initiatives to make the world better, I'd say, "Ok, Whatever." But here, you might be sitting on an idea that could genuinely contribute to a better world. If that's the case, you've got a moral duty to go all out to make it a reality. To put it bluntly, if the fear of failure feels like a death sentence, not giving it your all is failure guaranteed. The biggest failure is doing nothing.

The easiest way to overcome the fear of failure is to team up with individuals who are completely different from you. According to the Glocalities research, creatives who collaborate with people of diverse personality types, ideally go-getters and achievers, are more likely to make an impact. These individuals know how to break down your ideas into clear action plans, budgets, and more. So, step out of your creative bubble and make connections! In my experience, people are eager to help. Share your idea with them, ask for assistance in the areas of research, finance, and project management. It not only improves the idea but also makes it more manageable. You don't have to do

everything on your own, and it becomes more enjoyable, with a greater chance of success. And... if things don't go as planned, you share the failure together, making the likelihood of feeling like a total failure much smaller. However, rest assured that you'll have learned a lot. In my eyes, you can't truly fail if you just give it a shot. Ultimately, it's better to have ten failures and one success than never attempting anything at all. Go for it. The world needs you! Before we delve into practical tips for attracting funding, here's a quick note for creatives with dyslexia/dyscalculia: don't let it hold you back. Consider adding someone with numerical talent to your team. This will boost your chances of success as you focus on what you excel in: creative ideas. The same practical advice applies to those consistently struggling with their personal finances, a common challenge for creative individuals. Ensure your personal finances are stable first. Tackling a significant world-improving project while dealing with stress from debt collectors is tough. In such cases, concentrate on the preparatory phase—crafting plans, conducting research, and assembling the right team. That's a significant step in itself.

Practical tips to attract funding

Now, let's secure some funding for your project. There are books written on how to increase your chances of raising money, but they are not necessarily tailored for creatives with a world-improving idea, be it a campaign, a creative intervention, or even a social enterprise. So, I'd like to touch on a few things, but they certainly won't be exhaustive. Moreover, I don't have the golden formula; I've failed more than succeeded. But, enough disclaimers: here are a few of my learnings.

A good creative solution to a serious issue has likely never been tried before, making it sound so incredible that the potential funder is intrigued, but can't assess the chances of success. This is important to keep in mind. As a creative, you're happy to present something original and out of the box, however, for financiers it ultimately needs to fit within certain parameters. Don't shy away from a request to reshape your idea into something that aligns with their criteria. They speak a different language, and you genuinely need to make an effort to translate your idea into their comfort zone. This isn't a devaluation of your idea; it's the process of transforming your idea into a format that they have to use to justify potential funding.

Reducing uncertainty significantly boosts the chances of securing funding. You're not the only one seeking funding, and a financier can only allocate a set of funds once. What you need is a well-defined and crystal-clear Theory of Change (see also Chapter 3, Tip 3 Small is Great), and not one based on assumptions. Every step in your Theory of Change must be thoroughly researched and described. In short, precisely define the problem, outline how your creative idea will bring about change, and specify the impact. While polished visuals of your idea can help win over financiers, they are never as crucial as a well-crafted Theory of Change. But please make sure that your idea can be encapsulated in a short and simple story that the investor can easily memorize and share.

A financier will want to see: a well-structured, realistic and prudent budget (i.e. treat others' money as you would treat your own), a solid timeline with interim evaluation moments and built-in exit points. But they'll especially want to assess the chances of success. And that might be the most challenging part of a creative idea that, by definition, has never been done before.

What can work is presenting scenarios, or endorsements from experts and celebrities can also help. However, there will always be an element of uncertainty. If there's no uncertainty at all, is the idea really unique and creative enough?

I tried to secure funding for this book and research project, and leveraging my track record, I did manage to get a seat at the table with potential funders. But, in the end, it ultimately fell through because the combination of research and a book weren't sexy enough, especially when compared to my previous more media-savvy projects. Of course, I pulled out all the stops to demonstrate that the impact could be substantial when creatives feel empowered to pursue their creative ideas. But, okay, let's move on; money is not an issue, right? I'm proceeding without third-party funding. Fortunately, I've been able to still rely on the support of my fantastic partners who were willing to take a risk and voluntarily contribute to bringing the Creative Under Fire project to fruition.

One risk in dealing with financiers is the chance they'll want something in addition to the core of your creative idea. For the creative individual passionate about their impactful idea, this can feel like the funder doesn't fully grasp it. I have experienced this first hand, especially with creative projects that seemed almost too ambitious. Let me share a few examples from my own experience.

I was working on a sequel to *Make Friends Across Religions* and met a philanthropist interested in supporting us. His one catch was that we'd arrange a dinner for him and his friends at the Sistine Chapel ... and that the world's most prominent religious leaders would drop by to shake their hands! Pushing back, I questioned whether it wouldn't be better to focus on the impact

we could generate through a joint appeal by the religious leaders. Yes, of course, was the response, but I also want that dinner. Of course, I didn't want that, and couldn't arrange it either way. It felt like an insult to me. What I realized after the fact was that the philanthropist loved the idea but couldn't imagine us actually pulling it off. So, he thought, "If Mark arranges a dinner in the chapel, at least I've gotten something out of it."

Later, I had a conversation with another billionaire who was also open to financing the project in question. Fortunately, he didn't request a dinner in the Sistine Chapel, instead, he wanted a family member who had just started making films to create a documentary about the process. Initially, I thought that sounded reasonable, but that feeling vanished when he took a step further. I was also required to arrange for the documentary to be broadcast globally during prime time. This was something I couldn't and did not want to organize because it deviated too far from the essence of the already-challenging idea.

It's essential to realize that a funder might be interested in a side aspect of your project, not because they think your project is foolish—you wouldn't have a seat at the table if that were the case—but to alleviate their uncertainties with your original idea. It's good to understand this beforehand, not to take offense, but rather to be grateful. Ideally, you can steer towards a side project that is manageable and contributes to the larger picture. Unfortunately, this insight came to me just a bit too late. Although the sequel to *Make Friends Across Religions* was eventually realized, it occurred without external funding.

Putting your funder at ease is of the utmost importance, but sometimes you simply can't reduce all the risks beforehand. In those cases, it might help to resort to more extreme measures to put them at ease. I once intuitively proposed that if all else failed,

an initiative-partner could drive me through the factory grounds covered in tar and feathers having run out of reasons why our project would make an impact. Surprisingly, it worked because the investor felt the commitment. They sensed that we were willing to go above and beyond to make it happen. Thankfully, that project, Neighbor Day for Douwe Egberts and Het Oranje Fonds, turned out to be a great success.²⁰

Are you ready to go all in? Then let's aim for a meeting with a potential funder. Securing a seat at the table with the right person can be challenging. Where do you find them? It's quite a departure if you're used to working on commission, as many creatives do, where the client brings you a problem to solve. But if you've identified a problem you want to solve yourself, you have to make sure to also find a funder willing to take on that problem with you. It's crucial to find someone with a track record that aligns or can align with your theme. It makes a significant difference if there's already a link to your issue. It's important to recognize that finding the right funding source is a project in itself. It might feel like an aside, but the funding project must be as well-executed as your ultimate creative project.

It is good to explore the numerous potential sources of funding for your project. They range from subsidies, loans, foundations, companies, impact investors, crowdfunding, philanthropists, to personal funds. Each funder has its own merits. Conduct a thorough analysis and develop a one-pager for each source, a description of your idea tailored to that specific funding form, and make an initial selection with your team, of which sources you deem promising. Then, engage in exploratory discussions with various parties. Seek their advice and understand that this takes time, so begin while giving shape to your creative idea.

Don't wait until the end because, by then, you only want one thing, and that is to bring your idea to fruition. One thing to note is that subsidy providers often prefer that you haven't started yet.

Watch out for dirty money

For safety, always check if the source of the money is clean. Apart from the fact that you must do everything to prevent greenwashing or money laundering, it can significantly harm your project. Once, we received a message from what seemed to be a clean funding source that wanted to support a creative climate idea. However, after a bit of digging, the source was far from clean, in fact, it was from deep within the oil industry and we couldn't accept the money. And that sounds logical, of course, but when you've been working on a project for a long time, and suddenly it seems like the funding is falling into place, the temptation is greater than you might think. So, be strong! And don't be mistaken; the truth always comes out. This also applies to companies that want to embrace your creative world-improving idea. Ask yourself and them: are you stepping in purely for the cause, or is it an image-improving campaign for the company? It doesn't have to be a problem per se, as long as you know it beforehand and are sure it's not greenwashing. But also here, pay close attention to the nuances. Be sure to check out the wonderful *Ladder of Charity* by Maimonides, which allows for a much more nuanced approach to this topic. There are many shades of green. However, let's be clear: Avoid greenwashing at all times. For more on Maimonides, greenwashing, and a summary of 24,000 warnings, see the LetsHeal book: *How Advertising Will Heal the World and Your Business*.²¹

Don't give up

And, of course, it's essential that you and the funder have a click. It might seem like a different world, but chances are you share the same dreams, so make sure you do. That's where you can connect. And, of course, if it doesn't feel right, follow your instincts and don't proceed.

If it doesn't work out at once, make sure you don't become dispirited. Learn from each encounter with a funder, sharpen your story, and never forget: you have the out-of-the-box imagination to turn an abstract tool, which is money, into actual world-improving impact. And remember: money is not an issue, you may be able to realize the idea even without funding. It might become smaller, or you might start with your resources to run a pilot and later see if you can still attract financing. Alternatively, seek organizations you initially wanted to work with and try to convince them to join without any monetary exchange. It's challenging, but it's possible. We were able to bring the Sweetie project to life (see Chapter 1), because a number of parties were willing to contribute over a million euros, primarily in-kind, to our project. This was possible because everyone was moved by the subject and felt they could make a difference in their specific domain.

One final thought about Money No Issue, when it comes to personal finances: the sheer beauty of making your cherished creative project a reality goes far beyond the joy of achieving typical materialistic dreams like getting a bigger apartment, a fancier car, or the latest gadget. I assure you, after a few projects, you'll find that the significance of having money diminishes. That, my friend, is genuine wealth.

TIP 8 BODY PRIORITY

“Did you notice anything unusual?” asked the haptotherapist. “No,” I replied. “Shall I tell you more about the super idea we’re working on?” “Oh, didn’t you realize that I’m sitting on top of your legs?” “Oh, no, oops...”

In the context of teaching what you need to learn the most, this is a big one. As creatives, we have a fantastic inner world, a strong and delightful imagination. It’s such a unique place that the body often feels like it’s just carrying the mind, and that can be tricky. Your body sends crucial signals when you’re overwhelmed, potentially affecting your ability to be creative under pressure. Your body has a lot to communicate. Understanding this is one thing, but truly experiencing it is another. So, I’ve tried prioritizing listening to the guy who lives under my brain. Just to be clear, I’m not an expert, but I’ve tested a lot on myself, and there’s much to learn. Vacation may seem dull, sleep might be meh; it’s all about adrenaline. Because when you’re so immersed in the idea you’re working on, everything else seems less important. You become so absorbed that things like vacation or sleep quickly seem insignificant — only the project you’re working on truly matters.

Listen closely to your body, especially if you tend to escape into your thoughts at the slightest challenge. Learn to tune in to your body; it helps you sound the alarm in time — a crucial skill for being creative under pressure and striving for lasting positive impact. To throw in a cliché: put your oxygen mask on before assisting others; you can’t effectively care for others in the long term if you neglect to take care of yourself. Achieving impact is akin to a demanding sport, requiring sustained high performance. So, work out, eat well, sleep, meditate, socialize, don’t

forget vacations, prioritize your hobbies, and engage in activities that make your body feel good. While I don't want to sound patronizing, I have to say: steer clear of drugs and excessive alcohol use. In fact, if you need substances to cope, seek help immediately.

All right, but how should you listen to your body? Here are some methods I tried and tested—things that helped me better hear what my body was trying to say and stay resilient in stressful situations.

Find something that truly resonates with you. One thing that greatly benefited me is haptotherapy, derived from the Greek word “haptein”, meaning “to touch”. In this therapy, touch is used to establish a connection with the client, fostering self-awareness, emotional expression, and well-being. I tend to lose the connection with my body during the creative process and interventions, fully immersing myself, which can be very unhealthy; skipping self-care and missing signals of stress. Recommendation: embrace your tension instead of avoiding it, by going to the point of stress or pain in your body, and really feel it. And if that's difficult, movement, like dancing or shaking your body, can help stop you from fleeing to your brain.

But that's not all; the following are some other things I've done and continue to do. No matter what you choose, if you recognize the core insight, find the method that suits you.

Personally, I've found great benefits in Body Stress Release (BSR), tai chi, bioresonance, HeartMath, acupuncture, osteopathy, the Buteyko method, and breathing techniques, especially handy for recovering from stressful experiences or temporary tension. When things get overwhelming for me, box breathing,

the technique used by Navy SEALs, is highly recommended (google it; it's a must-have in every creative under fire's toolbox), yoga, Zen, guided meditation (particularly the body scan), sound therapy, and more. Earthing (like walking barefoot through the forest), just being in nature, and forest bathing are also fantastic. Discover the approach that fits you, and don't keep it to yourself. Encourage prioritizing it within your team. It's not a luxury; it's essential. Emphasize the importance of taking good care of yourself in all aspects. Going to a haptotherapist or psychologist should be as normal as going to the dentist.

Good to know, what works for you may not work for others. I experimented with a big gong ringing every hour in the workspace with all my colleagues. This served as a signal to let go for a minute, drop everything, and just reflect on what you are doing, how you feel, in total silence, so no conversations, no phone calls or anything else. Afterward, we resumed with the goal of being more conscious. Half of them loved it; the other half hated it. So, I put the gong on my phone instead.

What if your body starts sending you signals you can't ignore (as I described in Chapter 1)? It's okay not to be okay occasionally. A fluttering heart, a headache, or even a panic attack isn't a disaster, but a signal you're approaching your limit. If you consistently experience poor sleep, agitation, obsessive focus, fatigue, tremors, pain, or anxiety, take action. Ruthlessly put your world-changing project on hold, or scale it back to regular hours (as described in Chapter 3, Tip 6, War is Work). Share your situation with your team—it's tough, but necessary. Address it early for a faster recovery.

There's nothing to be ashamed of; taking care of yourself is a sign of professionalism!

TIP 9

HAVE NO MERCY; KILL YOUR DARLINGS

I've often witnessed creatives pitching their old ideas as the solution to a different problem. Or persistently pushing one idea, secretly in love with it, but one that's probably an unattainable love, yielding nothing but stress. Staying attached to that old idea holds back other and better ones. Let me offer some advice:

Kill them. These ideas clog up the flow of new ones, like hairs in a drain.

I get it; it's not a pleasant task, but do it. Clean them out. Bid them farewell in a way that suits you, but never let them come back. Especially when you're young, you might hesitate to trust this, but believe me, as a creative, you have a scarcity of everything except a continuous flow of ideas. Don't block that flow. By actively getting rid of weaker ideas, there's a good chance you'll receive a better one, or even several. Find your way to say goodbye and even make it a bit fun. Some people burn the idea, others write it a letter or bury it. Invent your creative method, as long as it works for you and makes the process a little more enjoyable.

Now, when do you decide that an idea is really not up to par and needs to be discarded? First and foremost, if you can't get the Theory of Change clear (See Chapter 3, Tip 3, Small is Great), it's time to say goodbye; it becomes a waste of effort. Personally, I have no issue spending a long time realizing an idea. Still, as soon as there's even a hint that the Theory of Change is flawed and cannot be fixed, I ruthlessly say goodbye to it. That might sound a bit mystical, but I bid the idea farewell, thanking it for the lessons learned and move on.

Before I started the Sweetie project (see Chapter 1), I worked on another idea to project peace messages onto clouds in conflict areas using satellites and a laser beam. It might sound technically complicated, but after discussions with the Netherlands Aerospace Centre, it was clear that it was technically feasible. We even put a price tag on it and figured out how to finance it. After a year of tinkering, I presented it to the then-boss of one of the world's largest charities. In less than 5 minutes, he ended my dream by pointing out why the media impact could be exactly the opposite. I understood he was right. In the elevator down, I had already waved goodbye to the idea. If that hadn't happened, I might've still had my head in the clouds, never realizing the projects outlined in Chapter 1.

I sometimes receive surprised reactions about how easily I can let go of an idea. I think it's because I know that as one idea departs (which wasn't good anyway), another one quickly presents itself. And it doesn't bother me because the project's intention was to make an impact. If it turns out that the impact is likely not happening, then it's a waste to continue. This raises an interesting, perhaps painful question: what is your intention in addressing the problem? This applies to your team members and partners too. If your intention is genuinely to make a serious impact, well, then you don't have to worry. Kill your darling if it's not good enough. But be honest about your intention. Is it pure? If not, find out what is standing in the way of impact.

I frequently seek input from experts and a few trusted individuals to help refine and improve ideas. I try to ensure that I've done everything possible to make it a success. Refer to Chapter 2 for guidance on transitioning your idea from your mind to reality.

Let others kill it

Don't be afraid of negative feedback on your idea. Embrace it. It's often given out of love and might provide valuable insights. In fact, invite people to challenge your idea. Personally, I love engaging in war-games where I encourage others to break down the idea. Why, I ask, is this idea a flawed concept? You might not enjoy it in the beginning, but it's essential. Better to face criticism in the preparation phase than later during the execution. Consider this: if you can't handle criticism and lose an open mind about your project at this point, it's probably a risk.

What if others want to dismiss your cherished idea, but you maintain an open and constructive attitude and simply don't agree? Well, if you encounter unjustified criticism, just let it go. As my friend and NOAH founder, Marco Rodzynek wisely puts it, "Don't be frustrated by how individual people react to your world-changing plans. It's a collective failure, not a personal one, and nobody should feel personally responsible." In simpler terms, if people don't support your ambitious ideas, it's not a reflection of your personal failure, it's more systemic. So, don't take it personally; it's about differing perspectives rather than a critique of your abilities or intentions.

In reality, emotions surrounding feedback and constructive criticism are intertwined. The key is to share the received feedback with your team members in the Safe Space (see Chapter 3, Tip 5, Safe Spaces). It is helpful to approach feedback with a collaborative and open mindset. You can try to analyze it rationally, but in my quest for effective tips on being creative under fire, I discovered a way to work on emotional granularity.²² Similar to how the Inuit have dozens of ways to describe snow, it can be helpful to do the same with your emotions. This way, you can better separate the actual feedback from your reactions to it.

The bigger our palette in describing emotional responses, the more nimble we become when faced with difficulties, including the pain of rejection. Reading fiction and learning foreign words for emotions are some of the ways we can improve our emotional granularity. Making nuanced distinctions between emotions makes us more resilient.

And then, hopefully, comes the moment of completion, where you've taken in all feedback and realized the project to the best of your ability. Finally, the idea goes public and as it materializes and enters the public eye, you'll receive all kinds of feedback, both positive and negative. That, in itself, is fantastic—you've made it, and your idea is being noticed. I've been in the spotlight a few times and taken in all sorts of responses. It's worthwhile to absorb them, examining if there's anything to learn. As long as your intentions were pure and you've done everything to realize the project to the best of your ability, you'll be able to take all feedback in stride. Act swiftly because attention fades fast, which is also good to know especially if the project didn't turn out as well as you'd dreamed. I try to gather both positive and negative feedback, viewing both as a battery that charges me up for the next time.

TIP 10

WHERE'S THE HOPE?

If you're currently struggling to find hope, grappling with structural depressive or suicidal thoughts, seek professional help without delay.

To be honest, I used to view hope as somewhat trivial, something to talk about to avoid taking real action. But the second you start talking to people who have lost hope, as I did after numerous conversations with audiences, your perspective can change. Frequently, young people would ask, “Your adventures sound amazing, but what’s the purpose behind it all?”

After exploring mental well-being statistics and Chapter 2’s research findings, I realized I had perhaps dismissed hope simply because I’d already had an abundance of it. Life is different without hope. Hope fuels impact, encompassing positive thinking, optimism, and a persistent belief in a path to success.²³ I can’t even fathom how challenging and stressful it must be when hope is gone. Where can you find hope when it’s absent? Let’s explore.

I’m not referring to superficial hope, the type of reassurance like: “don’t worry, let it go, it will be alright.” That’s false hope, even though the speaker means it sincerely, intending it as a friendly gesture. Letting go isn’t that easy, though, when you’re focused on issues the world can’t ignore.

First and foremost, a call to those with hope: I believe hopeful people must share their hope. Having hope is not a given, so share it as much as you can. Demonstrate how your hope leads to positive change through action. Be the example. Show how you find light in the smallest things and encourage others. To quote my dear friend and source of inspiration, Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp:

“Hold onto the assignment with both hands: To keep planting the seeds of hope in the inhospitable present.”

It also requires courage. The courage to be hopeful, even if it means going against the currents, as Amanda Gorman²⁴ beautifully expresses:

*“For there is always light,
if only we’re brave enough to see it.
If only we’re brave enough to be it.”*

Conversely, if you find yourself lacking hope or occasionally losing courage, surround yourself with hopeful people. Seek connections with hope, allow yourself to be influenced, and ask for support. This applies even to those with an abundance of hope; stay connected with it. For me, attending protests is a way to absorb the hopeful energy of others and reassure myself that I’m not alone in my aspirations.

Beware of individuals who drain your hope. While it’s crucial to be wary of negative people, also recognize the impact of factors like social media algorithms. One common hope-drainer is *doom-scrolling*. Ensure you don’t fall into this trap; instead, fill your online feeds with positive and uplifting content. I like to start my day with BrightVibes, The Happy Activist, The Optimist and Upworthy feeds.

It’s possible to learn to see the light. There are numerous ways and simply wanting to notice that tiny spark of hope is already a significant step. You can discover it in a way that resonates with you. Here are a few methods that you might have heard of, I’ve found valuable. Just see what makes your heart skip a beat:

Fully engage with nature, whether through practices like forest bathing, or by immersing yourself in art, music, or religion. Learning to meditate can help you embrace the hope within yourself. Additionally, consider starting a gratitude practice, which involves acknowledging and appreciating the positive aspects of your life, cultivating a mindset of thankfulness. And always keep in mind, you don't need to bear the weight of the world; begin with small steps (please see Chapter 3, Tip 3 Small is Great). Gradually, you'll make progress, and hopefully, hope will flourish.

Also, I would like to advocate for sharing a good laugh. Laughing together is one of the most effective ways to relieve your own tension and that of your team. It not only makes the worst moments more bearable but also lightens the atmosphere, thereby strengthening the hope. When laughter ceases, it's often a sign that something isn't going well.

What helps me when things aren't going smoothly—which is of course not a fundamental lack of hope, but just a temporary setback—is realizing that even if things aren't working out, I have still decided to take action. Being in the position to invest time in a project and understanding that if it were genuinely easy, it would have been done already, keeps me motivated.

BONUS TIP THE BEST: YOURS!

I hope the suggestions I've shared are helpful, but I know they don't cover everything, and I'm sure there are tons of great ones out there. If you have your own methods and they help keep you creative under fire, they're truly valuable. If you're willing, it would be great if you could share your tips and insights with us. Please send them to: info@letsheal.org. Thanks a lot!

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Buck, P.S., (1932 – 1973), writer and teacher, Pulitzer and Nobel Prize winner. The author was inspired by the legendary Dutch ad man, Lode Schaeffer who cited Buck in his *Coq d'Honneur acceptance speech* on January 26th, 2015, Amsterdam.
2. In 2013, Willem van der Schoot, the author, and a team from ad agency Lemz spent a week at the United Nations Headquarters to provide various creative perspectives on urgent issues.
3. According to a 2015 research report by UNESCO, the International Confederation of Societies of Authors and Composers (CISAC) and EY, The Culture and Creative industry generates US\$2,250 billion a year, i.e. 3% of the world GDP, and employs 29.5 million people (1% of the world's active population). <https://tinyurl.com/4624j9kj>
4. Woerde, M. (2011). *How Advertising Will Heal the World and Your Business*. Free book and research download from LetsHeal.org. (ISBN 978-90-484-1927-2).
5. The term 'deepfake' originated around 2017, and the technology rapidly evolved, making it challenging to pinpoint a single first deepfake video. However, one of the early and

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11. *“In comparing Creative Connectors to the entire group of Creatives, a noteworthy difference of 0.1 standard deviation emerges, signifying statistical significance. Moreover, when juxtaposed with Creatives scoring the lowest on interpersonal connection, the disparities are 0.25 standard deviation for pessimism and 0.22 for feelings of societal letdown. These variations bear significant importance in the context of international research.”* (Martijn Lampert, Research Director Glocalities Amsterdam)
12. *“47% of this group is drawn to the imagination values card, compared to 35% in other segments. And, of course, the difference with the Conservatives segment is even more significant. Only 29% of that group finds the imagination values card attractive. Additionally, our research indicates that dreams and fantasies are*

more important to the Creatives, with a substantial difference of 0.23 standard deviation.” (Martijn Lampert, Research Director Glocalities Amsterdam)

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14. Woerde, M. (2011). *How Advertising Will Heal the World and Your Business*. Page 121-131. Free download from LetsHeal.org
15. Sarah Louise Palin is an American politician, commentator, author, and reality television personality. She was the 2008 Republican vice presidential nominee alongside U.S. Senator John McCain and has occasionally faced criticism for her somewhat oversimplified worldview.
16. Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. is the executive director of the Mindsight Institute and founding co-director of the Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA, where he was also principal co-investigator of the Center for Culture, Brain and Development and Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the School of Medicine. An award-winning educator, Dan is the author of five New York Times bestsellers and over fifteen other books which have been translated into over forty languages. As the founding editor of the Norton Professional Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology (“IPNB”), Dan has overseen the publication of one hundred books in the transdisciplinary IPNB framework which focuses on the mind and mental health.
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23. Gillette, H. (November 27, 2023). The Importance of Hope: 8 Examples. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/ycyp2sc8>. Reviewed by Bethany Jubly, PsyD.
24. January 20, 2021. Poet Amanda Gorman made history as the youngest inaugural poet during President Joe Biden's swearing-in ceremony in Washington. Gorman's recitation of her poem: *The Hill We Climb*, captivated audiences worldwide, symbolizing hope and unity during a tumultuous time.
25. Christiana Figueres, former UN Climate Chief and co-host of Outrage+Optimism podcast. Ms. Figueres is a Costa Rican diplomat and environmental leader. She is best known for her role as the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) from 2010 to 2016. Figueres played a crucial role in the negotiations

leading to the landmark Paris Agreement on climate change in 2015. Throughout her career, she has been a prominent advocate for climate action and sustainable development.

26. Professor Kees Klomp is a Dutch author and educator in the field of conscious capitalism and sustainable business. He currently serves as program manager AGENCY! at Windesheim University of Applied Science.

APPENDIX A: CASE STUDY

Please download and read the full case study from
letsheal.org/book

The differences in emotional responses, neurological responses, and coping styles between creative individuals and a baseline group.

*By Roderick Reichenbach (founder Braingineers). Commissioned by LetsHeal.org.
Special thanks to Prof. Dr. M. Tops*

Abstract

Creativity is a complicated human capability, and interestingly, some are better at being creative than others. Research suggests that creative individuals with a high absorption levels respond differently to stress than average individuals with low absorption level do. Here, it is hypothesized that creative individuals are affected differently by stress, based on neuropsychological findings, differences in absorption level / coping strategies, and neurological response. The current experiment makes use of a case intending to support the notion that creative individuals are affected by stress differently than more logical individuals are. While in stress, on average, the creatives have a higher absorption level, they make use of a specific coping style in comparison to the norm group, and the creatives show relatively more right brain activity in contrast with non-creatives.

I Introduction

Creativity is a sophisticated human capability that has been studied for decades. There are plenty of anecdotal stories to be found on the internet concerning the - seemingly magical - creative brain. In order to unravel its mysteries, (neuro)science attempts to study the creative brain, through, for example, (f)MRI ((functional) magnetic resonance imaging), EEG (electroencephalogram) and DTI (diffusion tensor imaging). One exciting aspect of the creative brain is how it copes with stress. The effects of stress on creativity appear to be - based on anecdotal information - quite large, and research suggests that this might indeed be the case (Van Dyne, Jehn & Cummings, 2002; He & Wong, 2015). However, the workings of these effects are, as of yet, still under investigation. In order to illustrate the functioning of a creative brain versus a

between creatives and logicals on a neuronal basis, a coping basis, and a conscious emotional basis.

To clarify the effects of stress on creative individuals versus logical individuals, previous studies on neuropsychological findings, differences in absorption levels / coping strategies, and conscious emotional response will be consulted. Firstly, the neurological response to stressful stimuli will be taken into consideration.

Generally, stress has a severe impact on the functioning of the brain (for examples of this research, see: Yang, Qi, Guan, Hou & Yang, 2012; Dedovic, Duchesne, Andrews, Engert, Pruessner, 2009; Dedovic, Renwick, Mahani, Engert, Lupien, Pruessner, 2005). Since the creative brain is likely to show different baseline activity than a "logical" brain does (Beaty, Benedek, Wilkins, Jauk, Fink, Silvia, & Neubauer, 2014; Fink, Graif, &

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But above all, I thank you, the reader, for picking up this book. I sincerely hope it helps you in achieving your world-changing projects. The world needs you!



Credits: Marcel Kampman

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Woerde (born 1973 in the Netherlands), is a globally acclaimed creative force for good, named by *AdAge magazine* as one of the “50 most creative thinkers in the world”. Throughout his career, he has received over a hundred significant awards in recognition of his work. Mark is renowned for his groundbreaking interventions, including combating Webcam Child Sex Tourism, where his efforts not only encouraged global political and law enforcement authorities to act, but also reached over a billion people, ultimately leading to the rescue of children. Mark was later the driving force behind the initiative Make Friends Across Religions, a collaborative endeavor involving the world’s most prominent religious leaders.

In 2010, Mark founded *LetsHeal.org*, a non-profit organization dedicated to implementing creative solutions for a better world. His influential book, *How Advertising Will Heal the World and Your Business* (2011) pioneered prosocial marketing, with Mark later delivering countless lectures on the subject. LetsHeal spearheads numerous initiatives driven by a deep-seated love for Mother Earth and all her inhabitants. Prior to LetsHeal, Mark co-founded *Lemz*, which became a top advertising agency. Following its sale in 2016, Mark shifted his focus entirely to LetsHeal, dedicating himself full-time to its mission. Feel free to contact Mark via letsheal.org.



A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR CREATIVE PEOPLE ON STAYING SANE WHILE SOLVING THE WORLD'S INSANE PROBLEMS

Unleash your creative potential alongside Mark Woerde, celebrated as one of the world's most renowned creatives. Confront global challenges without feeling overwhelmed as Mark shares his personal journey, including his pivotal role in leading a successful anti-child abuse initiative, seen by over one billion people on evening news broadcasts around the world.

What started as a personal and intense search to stay sane while trying to solve insane problems, grew into a years-long project after discovering that many young and established creatives, activists, and social entrepreneurs face the same challenges. A creative mind functions differently which requires some additional skills, presented in this book, to preserve sanity while making a positive impact.

From discussions with His Holiness the Dalai Lama to brain scans, extensive research with surprising outcomes, and expert advice, Woerde provides ten practical tips to thrive under pressure, even in the face of darkness. Be empowered to become an influential catalyst for positive change. Don't miss this book—a beacon of hope for creatives shaping a better world.

'Exponentiate your talent and harness it for good. If millions of creatives worldwide unite in this endeavor, we can generate an enormous positive force, contributing to the flourishing of humanity.'

Christiana Figueres, former UN Climate Chief²⁵

'The creative mind is unique and is prone to becoming overwhelmed in stressful situations. Therefore, it's highly recommended to take note of the suggested tips.'

Dr. Dan Siegel¹⁶

'This book underscores a vital yet overlooked theme, urging guidance for creative students managing mental pressures while driving societal change—a must-read for all.'

Prof. Kees Klomp²⁶

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