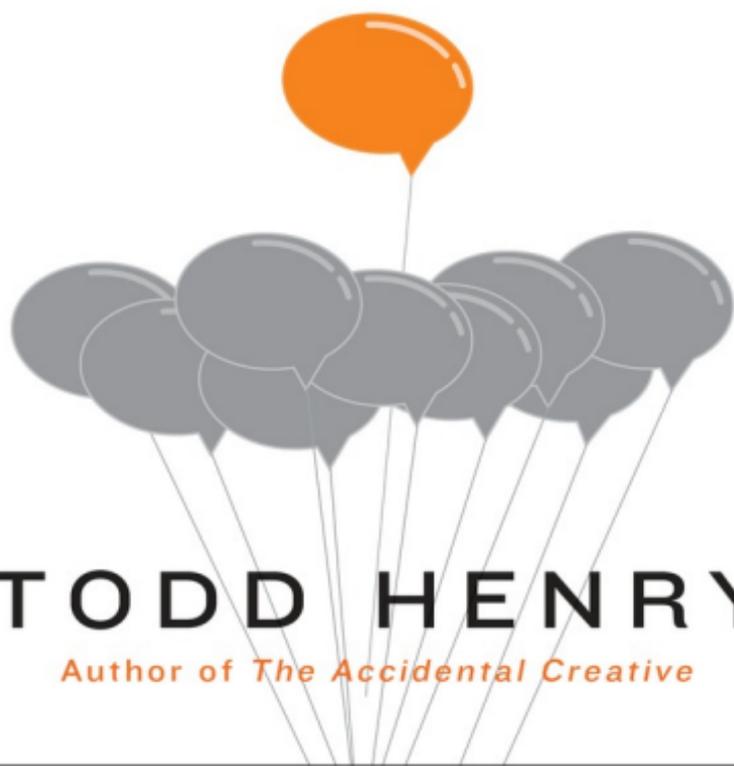


LOUDER THAN WORDS

HARNESS THE POWER OF
YOUR AUTHENTIC VOICE



TODD HENRY

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Introduction

When people don't express themselves, they die one piece at a time.

—Laurie Halse Anderson, *Speak*

Your work tells tales. It speaks about you, your values, your hopes, your ambitions, and ultimately what you deem worthy of your energy and attention. It reveals, intentionally or not, what you really think about the world around you. Ultimately, your body of work—which is any place you create value, whether through your job, your relationships, or any other way you spend your time and energy—is a standing testament to your existence on this speck of rock orbiting the sun.

Here's a question worth pondering: While your work speaks about you, does it really speak *for* you? Does it represent you well? Does it reflect the authentic you? (Or, in your busyness, have you even recently

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considered who the authentic you might be?) The key to making your work resonate is to uncover, develop, and then bravely use your authentic voice.

What does this mean? When you are pouring yourself into your work and bringing your unique perspective and skills to the table, then you are adding value that only you are capable of contributing. However, many people operate in “default mode,” and they ignore their hunches, their deeper intuition, and their unique vision, and instead settle into the fold. Over time, they become more of a reflection of everyone around them—or a faded photocopy of a photocopy—than an original source of ideas, energy, and life. Instead of doing the difficult work necessary to weave their influences together into something fresh and original, they settle for recycling the scraps in exchange for a quick return on their effort. In the end, they fall short of making a unique contribution that’s reflective of what they truly care about, and because of a lack of individuality and passion, their work is less likely to resonate with their audience.

However, brilliant contributors commit to the process of developing an authentic voice through trial and error, by paying attention to how they respond to the work of peers, heroes, and even their antagonists, by playing with ideas, by cultivating a sharp vision for their work, and ultimately by honing their skills so that they have the ability to bring that vision to the world. If you examine the most contributive, impactful, and ultimately influential people throughout history, the one thing that clearly sets them apart is their unique voice. They had developed a personal expression that distanced them from their peers and put them in a field of their own. Their body of work speaks loudly about who they are and what they value. Louder, even, than their words.

Whether you are a writer, a consultant, an entrepreneur, an engineer, a manager, or an artist, developing your authentic voice should be a top priority if you are serious about crafting a body of work that will

stand the test of time. Work, then, becomes about more than checking off tasks and pushing through projects. Instead, it is a means to carve a place in the world and create value that lasts. It becomes a means of genuine expression and a standing testament to your efforts.

WHAT IS VOICE?

For the purposes of this book, I'll define voice as the expression (idea) you make through a medium (platform) in order to achieve a desired outcome (impact). Whether you are creating a form of art, such as music or painting, or crafting a marketing message to reinforce your brand equity, your objectives will be accomplished by leveraging an expression through a medium, and the more resonant your message is with your audience, the more likely you will achieve your desired impact. Taken together, your collective body of work, as communicated through your voice, represents you, your style, your values, and your intentions.

Truly effective voices resound, meaning that others eventually become carriers of your expression. Ideally, your work will reach far beyond your immediate sphere of influence. However, crafting work that resounds isn't as simple as coming up with a viral meme or a catchy turn of phrase. While these tactics achieve short-term attention, a moment in the spotlight often fails to achieve lasting impact. This is why so many attention-grabbing television commercials never achieve long-term results for their brands. (A quick glance at post-Super Bowl audience survey results reveals that companies have paid millions of dollars for ads that as few as 35 percent of viewers associated afterward with their brand. Worse, a high percentage of viewers attributed them to their competitors. Perhaps the ads were memorable, but the company's voice wasn't distinguished enough from that of the competition to matter.) To resound means that your work connects deeply in some way with your audience, and that they in turn feel a connection to your

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work that's strong enough to compel them to respond, whether by sharing your work with others or by being mobilized to act in some way. The goal of developing an authentic voice isn't self-gratification, it's cultivating a greater ability to mobilize others toward a goal or objective, and in so doing achieve the impact you desire.

Those who are brave enough to dedicate themselves to the effort of discovering their authentic voice are impervious to the temporary cultural noise. Their work is founded upon a deep knowledge of who they are, what they want, and how they plan to achieve it. They have firm footing because they have rifled through the debris and uncovered bedrock. They have learned how to craft their work so that it represents their true selves and resonates with their audience.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Louder Than Words is divided into three sections. The first section addresses the reason many people struggle to develop their voice, and the distinct phases that artists, entrepreneurs, writers, and others have passed through on their journey. The second section addresses what I refer to as the Voice Engine, or the mechanism that allows you to identify, develop, and use your voice to achieve impact. You will learn about the importance of Identity as a driving force for your work, Vision for defining the impact you want, and Mastery as a means of getting your ideas into the world more effectively. The final section offers more practical day-to-day advice for implementing your voice in the course of teamwork, as a leader, and as you plan and shape your work over the long term.

My goal is not to simply inspire you with a new approach to finding your voice but to inspire you to act differently as you shape your work. Though there will be a lot of reflective exercises, this book is written for people who are already moving, and are looking for signposts to help them get even better. This is a book for doers.

Introduction

I hope to inspire you to seek an authentic voice, but you will see true growth only when you take action. There is no shortcut. In fact, as you develop your voice, you may often feel like you're failing even when you are on the verge of your greatest success. You will find yourself only if you are willing to first lose yourself in the process. It is the commitment to growth that matters, and small actions over time yield big results. As Don Baptiste, head of Bloomberg Government, told me in an interview, "You discover your voice by exercising it and getting in the mix. You might be surprised at what you find."

Don't project (and protect) an image of who you think you ought to be while abandoning your authentic self. Commit to the pursuit of brilliant work, even when immediate results are not guaranteed. As you'll soon see, this will require some self-examination, and a lot of strategic experimentation. However, as with many things, it's your courage and willingness to engage in the journey that defines you. We need you to be brave, and to be yourself. We need you to develop your authentic voice, and to put it in the mix.

PART 1



The Journey of Developing Your Voice

Chapter 1

The Art of Resonance

Masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.

—Virginia Woolf

Principle: To cultivate an authentic voice you must develop its three elements—Identity, Vision, and Mastery.

Have you ever heard yourself speaking or singing on a recording? I still remember the first time this happened to me, and when I played back the tape (yes, this was in the dark ages of analog recording), I couldn't believe how much different I sounded than what I'd expected. So much so, in fact, that it was almost as if I was hearing an entirely different person. (To my chagrin, I sounded less like a velvety Elvis Presley and more like a sad Pee-wee Herman.) Because of the resonance created in

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my skull by my vocal cords, I heard my own voice much differently than the recording revealed. This is the reason many people hate hearing the sound of their own, recorded voice. It sounds eerily foreign to them. (Do I really sound like that?)

I believe this same dynamic plays out with many people's metaphorical voice, though without the luxury of a playback button for immediate feedback. They are unaware of how their words and actions are collectively communicating to others. Worse, this lack of awareness may mean that they go about their lives and work behaving in a way that is inconsistent with who they really are, and perhaps even deeply disconnected from their true passions and ambitions. They project who they think they *should* be, and ignore the deeper signals about who they really *are*. Thus, they fail to infuse their authentic self into their work, and it fails to resonate deeply with others.

This is why I believe the most important work you will ever do is the work necessary to develop an authentic voice. I hope throughout this book to make the argument that your voice is both your single greatest possession and the most critical asset you share with the world. It is both the animating force for your best work and also the reason it gets noticed. And in the end, it is the source of both meaning and purpose in your work, and also the most likely generator of any success you experience.

By “authentic” I mean that your voice is sourced in the interplay of your unique passions, skills, and experiences. Contrary to how the word is often used today, this isn't necessarily about full transparency. Instead, it's about coming to a clear understanding of what you care about, then finding a way to infuse your work with the best of who you are so that it resonates in a unique way with your audience.

Your authentic voice is the expression of your compelling “why.” It defines the space that you are wired to occupy, and the unique value you are capable of contributing, which means that if you don't use it, then that contribution is unlikely to ever be seen. Unfortunately, some

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of the myths about how an authentic voice is developed can be counterproductive. For example, advice such as “Just follow your gut” or “Do what you love and everything will work out” sounds exciting, but often fails to help you achieve lasting results and impact. As you’ll see in the coming pages, developing your voice is not just about what you care about, it’s also about how your passions intersect with what others care about. It’s not only about what you say or do, it’s about how your work is received.

The degree to which you develop and use your authentic voice in the course of your work will often determine whether or not you feel invested, effective, and even recognized in the ways that matter personally. (On the other hand, it’s possible to be recognized for your work in ways that don’t matter to you and find that it feels like hollow praise. If you are not making personally meaningful progress in your work, no amount of success in the eyes of others is likely to fill the void.)

In etymological terms, our word *voice* is closely tied to the root of the word *vocation*, which is the term many people use as a substitute for the word job. However, I find it helpful to draw a sharp distinction between the words *occupation* and *vocation*. Your occupation is how you make a living, or at least what you spend most of your day doing. Your vocation, on the other hand, is the activity or expression you are naturally drawn to when given latitude over how to spend your focus, assets, time, and energy. It’s the sort of work that you feel compelled to do even when no one is paying attention. The active form of your vocation, and the way it’s experienced by others, is your voice.

Your occupation is simply a platform. It’s the arena in which you are given a chance to create an impact. For example, your job ideally allows you the opportunity to influence and change the world around you, even if it’s in a small way. Your vocation, on the other hand, is the expression that you make *through* your platform. It’s the unique value you add, and your authentic response to your environment. Your vocation cannot be

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fully contained by your occupation. It finds expression in all areas of your life.

Have you ever felt especially alive at the end of a meeting, task, or project? Maybe it's because something went really well, and you know that it simply wouldn't have happened without your efforts. It's more than just the rush of relief for having checked something off your list; it's that the value of your unique perspective and skills has been affirmed and that you've done something no one else could have. You experienced the thrill of operating in your "sweet spot." In these circumstances, your vocation, or calling, has found expression through your occupation. This is often when we feel most alive and contributive in our work. However, for many people, it's difficult to bridge the steep gap between who they are and what they do each day. Instead of heeding their intuition and taking risks with their work, they do what is expected, and play it safe by taking the tried-and-true route, trying not to stand out. As a result, their impact is limited, and they experience less of the joy that comes from pouring their unique and authentic self into their work.

Unfortunately, many people spend the bulk of their time trying to figure out how to grow their platform (their sphere of influence), but neglect the much more critical process of developing their voice. As a result, while they may grow the level of awareness for their work, their impact stalls over time because it is not rooted in something of substance. Your voice is the fuel that sustains your pace, and without it you will eventually lose steam. You cannot succeed through platform alone, at least not in the ways that matter.

THE VOICE ENGINE

To develop your authentic voice, you must cultivate three things: a strong sense of identity, which means doing work that is rooted in something

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substantive and personally meaningful; a consonant vision for your work, meaning a sense of the ultimate impact you want to have; and mastery of your skills and platform.

A strong, authentic, compelling voice is the expression of identity, guided by vision, and achieved through mastery. These three work together as a part of the lifelong process of growth and discovery. Developing your authentic voice is the result of lifelong layers of learning, experimentation, and failure. While it's possible to piece it all together over time through trial and error, I want to help you accelerate the process by building practices around each of these three core drivers.

Identity is primarily defined by the question "Who are you?" If I informally ask you that question, there are a number of ways you could respond. You could tell me about your childhood experiences, your job, your hobbies, your political views, or any number of other defining characteristics. However you respond, it would be a story about how you perceive yourself and your place in the world. In fact, your sense of identity is a collection of these stories. Whether the stories are true or false is somewhat irrelevant, because it's whether or not you believe them that defines how you behave. Regardless of what you profess to believe, your actions reveal the truth. When you act in a manner that's inconsistent with your true aptitudes and passions, it can create frustration, and over time can lead to a sense that you're not living up to your creative potential.

Thus, self-knowledge is a critical ingredient of identity, because when it is lacking you are more likely to compromise your true thoughts and beliefs. This is especially true when you are under pressure to deliver results. You must have a rooted understanding of why your work matters to you, what makes it unique, and why you believe it should also matter to others. I can often tell when someone is having an identity crisis, because they will communicate in one of two ways: broadly so as not to offend anyone, or so specifically and reactively (in

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order to appear confident) that they self-contradict when the winds of public opinion grow unfavorable to their previous stance. Your work must be rooted in something of substance so that you don't blow with the winds of change or challenge. As you'll see in the coming pages, thoughtful action is the best form of self-discovery.

The second part of the Voice Engine is vision, which is primarily defined by the question "Where are you going?" If you set out to build a bridge between two points on a river, you'd better first determine (a) the purpose of the bridge and the kinds of vehicles that will be crossing it, (b) whether you have sufficient resources and materials to complete the project, and (c) whether or not a bridge is even the right solution to the problem of crossing the river. To apply this metaphor to your work, it's important that you are able to articulate the kind of effect you wish to have, and how you want the world to be different through your efforts. You should at least have a sense of how you wish to connect with an intended audience, and how you plan to impact them. Though you don't want to become paralyzed with inaction out of fear of getting it wrong, your vision provides you with a set of guiding principles to help you stay aligned and measure your progress.

Many people falsely believe that brilliant contributors just follow their whims and let their "gut" decide from moment to moment where their work will lead them, but this is largely untrue. Though they rarely have all of their steps mapped out, the majority of the great creators and teams I've encountered at least have some sense of where their work is leading and the ultimate impact they want to have. They have a "north pole" toward which to navigate, even if only in a general sense. This vision is what guides their efforts as they continue to refine and develop their voice.

The final piece of the Voice Engine is mastery, which is defined by the question "How will you get there?" As you sharpen your skills, you have more tools in your toolbox and give yourself more options for expression. It's obvious that people who sharpen their skills and

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hone their instincts are far better positioned to create value, but in the midst of the daily fray we often forget to devote energy to personal skill and platform development. Brilliant contributors know that an opportunity exists only if they are able to recognize it and take advantage of it. In order to use your voice in ways that matter, you have to hone your skills so that you are prepared to jump on opportunities as they emerge. Mastery is also about honing your instincts and engaging in daily practice so that you develop the kinds of perceptions necessary to make intuitive leaps. No matter how skilled you are, if you don't have an outlet for that expertise, you will not succeed.

So your answers to these three questions, "Who are you?" "Where are you going?" and "How will you get there?" give you a map for developing your authentic voice. Your sense of identity leads you to a compelling vision, which then illuminates the skills and platform you need to master in order to succeed.

When all three of these elements are working together, they create a virtuous cycle of growth and effectiveness. You engage in self-discovery through action, refine your vision, and master new skills along the way. However, when one or more of the drivers of the Voice Engine are lacking, there is likely to be an outage in your ability to resonate with your audience.

IDENTITY + VISION — MASTERY = NOT CREDIBLE

You can have a clear sense of identity, and you can be guided by a compelling vision, but if you haven't developed the skills necessary to share your work effectively, then it will fall short. You can yell louder than everyone else, but you will still achieve little lasting impact. This is often the situation early in your career, as you are gaining your footing but still lack the skills necessary to accomplish your vision. You lack credibility, because your skills and platform for influence don't measure up to your ambition.

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IDENTITY + MASTERY — VISION = NOT CLEAR

Your audience craves clarity, and will seek out work by those who know where they are headed. Without a vision for your work you are like a ship at sea, unable to weather the storms of contrary opinions or challenges to your point of view. Your work may waffle and ramble to the point of confusion, and even early fans of your work will eventually lose hope and abandon you if they can't discern where you are leading them. Your vision is the compass that keeps you on the right bearing even while "making it up as you go."

MASTERY + VISION — IDENTITY = NOT CALLED

Without an identity-infused voice, your body of work will ultimately be hollow. Your audience is likely to discount you if your work feels inauthentic. This often happens when someone is chasing trends rather than aiming for impact. (Consider the trend of rapidly spreading but ultimately shallow list-based blog posts, or attention-grabbing headlines that may garner someone's focus for a short period but will not ultimately lead to any kind of significant impact other than momentary entertainment.) This is not to imply that all clever attempts to gain attention for your work are misplaced, but your body of work will be inconsistent if it's not rooted in something that matters to you.

IDENTITY + VISION + MASTERY = COMPELLING

When all the parts of the engine are working together, they fuel the discovery and use of your authentic voice. A greater sense of identity leads to a refined vision, which provides motivation to continue to master new skills. Through this greater mastery, you achieve influence, which then ideally helps you better understand your place in the world, and leads to a deeper understanding of the value you want to create. The cycle continues to repeat over and over throughout your life.

As you examine the above equations, which do you think most accurately describes you at the present time? Which of the three

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drivers are you best at, and weakest at? It's easy to get out of balance, as you deal with the pressures of work, family, and other responsibilities. This is why it's important to have a set of grounding practices to help you continue growing. In the coming pages, you'll discover tools to help you hone and strengthen your sense of identity, your vision for your work, and your mastery over your platform for expression. In other words, to answer "who are you?" "where are you going?" and "how will you get there?"

CHECKPOINT

Each of the following chapters will include the following checkpoints to help you stay aligned and focused, assess where you are with regard to the three drivers of the Voice Engine, and help you consider potential next steps on your journey of growth and discovery.

Excavation: You must first get to the "bedrock," or the core and guiding concerns, influences, and experiences that make your perspective unique. Why should anyone care what you think? Why should anyone listen to what you have to say? What makes your ideas more valuable than the ideas of others?

Observation: To grow, you must play the role of scientist. Which forms of expression seem to have the most impact? Which seems to resonate most deeply with your audience, or with you personally? By noting these areas of impact you can improve your precision and authority.

Redirection: Knowledge without action is useless. You must take what you uncover about yourself and apply it in the course of your daily work. Over time, you will develop a unique style or form of expression that helps you convey your thoughts and ideas.

EXCAVATION

As you consider the three elements of the Voice Engine (Identity, Vision, Mastery), which do you think is your strongest link? Which

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do you feel is your weakest? Everyone has a need for continued growth in each of these three areas, but identifying which one you struggle with the most can help you determine how to focus your efforts in the near term.

OBSERVATION

Think of a time in your life when you succeeded in doing work that influenced others and achieved the results you desired. What made it especially effective? Can you describe some qualities that reflect why that work was especially resonant with your audience?

REDIRECTION

As you go about your work this week, remind yourself daily of those moments when you were especially impactful, and the qualities that made your work resonant. As a starting point, try to infuse your work this week with more of those same qualities. (As we progress into later chapters, you'll learn some specific tools to help you do so.)

To learn more about *Louder Than Words*,
visit: www.toddhenry.com/louderthanwords