

EXCERPT

AWAKEN YOUR GENIUS

Escape Conformity,
Ignite Creativity, *and*
Become Extraordinary

Ozan Varol

author of Think Like a Rocket Scientist

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A genius is the one most like himself.

—THELONIOUS MONK

*What lies behind us and what lies before us are
tiny matters compared to what lies within us.*

—HENRY STANLEY HASKINS

Originality consists of returning to the origin.

—ATTRIBUTED TO ANTONI GAUDI

Introduction

It's Time to Wake Up

*There's a worm addicted to eating grape leaves.
Suddenly he wakes up . . . and he's no longer a
worm. He is the entire vineyard, and the orchard
too, the fruit, the trunks, a growing wisdom and
joy that doesn't need to devour.*

—RUMI, "THE WORM'S WAKING"

Dreams feel real when you're dreaming.

You find yourself in the middle of the action, unaware of how you got to where you are. You don't wonder how you regressed to your childhood or how you managed to grow wings and fly. It's only when you wake up that you realize you were dreaming.

Our lives work much the same way. It's hard to remember how we got to where we are, why we do what we do, and why we believe what we believe.

Think about it: How did you end up with the route you take to work every day? The way you brush your teeth? The side of the bed you sleep on? The way you take your coffee?

How did you adopt the beliefs you hold dear and the opinions that are so tightly woven into your identity? When was the precise moment in your life that you declared yourself to be a liberal, a conservative, or a fill-in-the-blank?

Which of these beliefs were truly your own choice? And which ones were implanted by your community, your schools, and your family?

It's hard to say.

We have little idea how we ended up here. We just know we're here, so we keep going. We sleepwalk through life. We get stuck in our rehearsed way of operating in the world. We choose things out of habit, not desire. We reaffirm the same beliefs, think the same thoughts, and make the same choices that lead to the same outcomes.

In a very real sense, our past becomes our future. What we chose earlier dictates what we do today. We drag ourselves into the same predictable tomorrow by reliving yesterday.

We say that some people march to the beat of a different drummer. But implicit in this cliché is that *the rest of us march to the same beat*. This is true to a disturbing extent. We're told from an early age not to cause a ruckus, to do what it takes to fit in without looking like we're trying.

We become defined by beliefs that aren't our own. We find ourselves on well-worn paths that were never ours to walk. We follow directions from other people who don't know us and who have no idea where we want to go. We color between the lines of sketches drawn by someone else.

As a result, we become a supporting actor in our own life.

We're conditioned to look for external patches to internal holes—to trust strangers more than we trust ourselves. This conditioning works well for the self-help industry: The “three principles of this” or the “five secrets to that” are just a credit-card swipe away. Corporations and governments, empowered by increasingly sophisticated algorithms, know us better than we know ourselves—leaving us vulnerable to control and manipulation.

Deep down we know we're destined for more—that we weren't put on Earth to do what we often do—but we feel imprisoned by

our unnatural indoctrination and programming. We become addicted to the reality we want to escape.

The price we pay for living in this world is betraying who we are—and disconnecting from the genius within.

Inside you is a vast reservoir of untapped wisdom. You are made up of every experience you've had, every story you've heard, every person you've been, every book you've read, every mistake you've made, every piece of your beautifully messy human existence. Everything that makes you *you*—a huge treasure waiting to be explored.

All that wisdom is concealed under the masks you wear, the roles you play, and the decades of social conditioning that have taught you to think like your teachers, to think like your parents, to think like your tribe, to think like influencers and thought leaders—to think like anyone but yourself.

As a result, we become strangers to ourselves. Many of us go from birth to death without knowing what we really think and who we really are.

Here's the thing: No one can compete with you at being you. You're the first and the last time that you'll ever happen. If your thinking is an extension of you—if what you're building is a product of your own genius—you'll be in a league of your own. But if you suppress yourself—if you don't claim the wisdom within—no one else can. That wisdom will be lost, both to you and to the world.

Think of humans as individual puzzle pieces that combine to build a beautiful collective. Each piece is important. Each piece is idiosyncratic. The puzzle cannot be completed with a billion corner pieces all of the same shape and color. What makes each piece different is also what makes it valuable to the collective. If you copy or conform to the other pieces, the world loses its full shape and color.

The puzzle pieces among us who embody their true shape and color are extraordinary. They stand out from the crowd—because they don’t copy the crowd. They’re not at the mercy of outside forces—because they sculpt those forces. They can’t be misdirected by others—because they self-author their life.

They also embody the magic of Teflon. They operate unconstrained by the opinions of others—and their own past opinions and identities. They think and act with genuine independence, offering up insights direct from their own depths.

These extraordinary thinkers are geniuses. By genius I don’t mean great talent or intelligence. A genius, in the words of Thelonious Monk, “is the one most like himself.” “Genius,” in its Latin origin, refers to the attendant spirit present at birth in every person. Each of us is like Aladdin, and our genie—or our genius—is bottled up inside of us waiting to be awakened.

Once they awaken their genius, extraordinary thinkers share it with the world around them. They channel the energy that brought them into existence and turn it into the art only they can create. They don’t just resist or disrupt the status quo—they reimagine the status quo and change the foundations of what’s possible. In the words of Apple’s “Think Different” campaign, they’re misfits, rebels, troublemakers—round pegs in square holes.

But the goal isn’t just to think differently. Someone who walks left simply because others are walking right is a conformist of a different kind. They’re still living in reaction to others, not on their own terms. The same is true for people who reject scientific facts and instead embrace conspiracy theories about flat Earths and lizard governments. They think these theories are the product of their own thinking when in fact they’ve been captured by a tribal narrative. Rebels without a cause, they’ve let their thinking become even more conformist. Strong convictions are a sign of the conventional-minded, not of the independent-minded.

We've been conditioned to fear independent thinkers. Once you get people to think for themselves, there's no telling where they'll go. Independent thinkers are a constant danger to the status quo and the people who benefit from it. Kings tremble, and their rule tumbles, when independent thought stirs.

Thinking *for* yourself doesn't mean thinking *by* yourself. It also doesn't mean you're better than other people or that you should fall in love with your own thoughts the way Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection in a pond. The myth of the lone genius is just that—a myth. As I'll explain later, a diverse community of thinkers who *don't* think alike can be a mirror for you and help you understand depths you'd otherwise miss. An orchestra of the *un*-like-minded, with every member playing their own best internal melodies, produces a whole symphony that is more than the sum of its parts.

In this era of mass manipulation, when so many otherwise intelligent people have been seduced by lazy thinking, what must it feel like to act instead of react to everything? To be confident that your beliefs are your own? To stop operating on autopilot? To carve your own path as a leader and creator? To act from your imagination instead of your programming? To show up as the extraordinary puzzle piece that you are instead of contorting yourself into the shapes you're told to be? To make your own dent in the universe?

This book is for aspiring universe-denters. It's a practical book for impractical people. It will give you the tools you need to wake up and find yourself—and to discover the melodies that only you can play in the symphony of life.

The book is organized into five parts.

The first part, *The Death*, is about *eliminating who you are not, so you can begin to discover who you are*. Here you'll enroll in a school of unlearning. I'll reveal how we lose ourselves when

we tie ourselves to an identity, a belief, a tribe, a job, another person, or our old self. You'll discover how to declutter your mind so you can find the genius within and focus on what matters. You'll learn how to uninstall your unnatural programming, discard what no longer serves you, and abandon what *is* so you can figure out what *could* be.

The second part, *The Birth*, is about *finding your way back to the real you*. You'll learn how to discover your first principles, your fingerprints, and your shape and color—the qualities that make up your genius. I'll reveal how you can diversify yourself and embrace your multitudes—instead of falling into the trap of defining yourself as a single, static, unevolving person. You'll learn how to create your own doors in life, instead of contorting yourself to fit through the doors that happen to be open.

The third part, *The Inner Journey*, is about *igniting your creativity*. In this part, I'll explain how to think for yourself, create original ideas, and make something out of nothing by tapping into your inner wisdom and mining yourself for insights. You'll learn why creativity is less about forcing ideas to come and more about unblocking obstacles that prevent their natural flow. I'll reveal practical ways to discover the big fish swimming in the depths of your own oceans. By the end of this part, you'll be equipped with practical strategies for creating art that matters—whether it's a book, a business, or a breakthrough idea.

The fourth part, *The Outer Journey*, is about *exploring the outer world and finding the balance between what's inside and what's outside*. I'll reveal my approach to filtering information and detecting bullshit. I'll explain why we become intellectually imprisoned so easily and how to escape the tyranny of the new, the convenient, and the popular. You'll discover how to look where others don't look, to see what others don't see, and to find the extraordinary in the ordinary. You'll learn why success stories

fool us, how well-meaning advice often misleads us, and what you can do to stop comparing yourself to others.

The fifth part, *The Transformation*, is about *your future*. I'll reveal why life is a jungle gym, not a ladder, how planning can blind you to better possibilities, and how to start walking before you see a clear path. You'll learn why your safety net might be a straitjacket, how letting go can be an act of love, and why a life lived carefully is a half-dead life.

When you wake up from the slumber of your past, the illusion of the Matrix will drop away and, like Neo, you'll begin to see all the 1s and 0s. Waking up will be jarring. The new self that emerges may seem foreign to you because it's been suppressed for so long. Side effects include headaches, existential crises, and really confused friends.

There will always be a reason to keep coloring inside the lines drawn for you by others—or the ones you've drawn for yourself. It will be agonizing to leave behind what feels comfortable to pursue what's uncomfortable—and to step into the unknown, where all things that never existed are created.

But as Zora Neale Hurston wrote, "There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you."¹ This book is here to help you uncover that story, tap into your inner wisdom, and give birth to your genius, your true self—the person you were meant to be.

You don't need a red pill or ruby red slippers to start this journey.

You're already home.

Turn the page and start to walk back to yourself.