

[Final analysis] Twyla Tharp

Modern-dance master Twyla Tharp, 62, has been an inspiration for more than four decades with her kinetic and innovative dance, but her views on the creative spark are surprisingly down-to-earth. In her new book, *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life*, she doles out hard-boiled advice: practice your craft, keep moving, don't compromise. Better take her word for it.

Chris Jozefowicz: You downplay inspiration—but haven't you experienced transcendent artistic moments?

Twyla Tharp: I know that sense, and I am grateful for it. Now, can I remember the last time that came to pass? Nope. I think that people who practice their craft regularly don't look to inspiration to the extent that people do who are, shall we say, dilettantes.

Tell me how your mom—these are your words—"built you step-by-step for a creative life."

By 6 months old, I was at the piano with [my mother] having ear training. Her sense was that if you isolate the kid when they're very, very young, they have a better shot at accomplishing something. I was isolated from all the kids in the neighborhood, even from my own family.

Did that fit your personality?

I didn't have a choice. It was either do it or rebel. Had I not had positive feedback, I might have rebelled.

Your parents never pushed you to become a dancer. How did you find your calling?

My father always said, "I don't care if you're a ditch digger, as long as you're the best ditch digger in the world." "OK, then, what can I be the best at?" I thought, "I can dance better than anybody." My body was very well-proportioned. I was stronger, faster, jumped higher and lasted longer than anybody else in the room. It was competitive. Kids should be encouraged to compete. The politically correct [ideal is that] everyone should be able to do everything. It does not work like that.

How does compromise play a role in—

Oh, no, I can't deal with compromise. I keep nibbling at the ultimate, and then I say, "OK, this is as close as you're going to get."

Well, are you usually happy with the end product?

Happy? That's another word like *compromise* that doesn't really exist.

OK. What about "satisfied"?

I [gauge success by] whether I have said what I meant to say completely, thoroughly, and I can be responsible for it. That's it.

