

Sfumato

*(Literally "Going up in Smoke")
A Willingness to Embrace
Ambiguity, Paradox, and Uncertainty.*

As you awaken your powers of *Curiosità*, probe the depths of experience, and sharpen your senses, you come face to face with the unknown. Keeping your mind open in the face of uncertainty is the single most powerful secret of unleashing your creative potential. And the principle of *Sfumato* is the key to that openness.

The word *sfumato* translates as "turned to mist" or "going up in smoke" or simply "smoked." Art critics use this term to describe the hazy, mysterious quality that was one of the most distinctive characteristics of Leonardo's paintings. This effect, obtained through the painstaking application of many gossamer-thin layers of paint, is a marvelous metaphor for the man. Leonardo's ceaseless questioning and insistence on using his senses to explore experience led him to many great insights and discoveries, but they also led him to confront the vastness of the unknown and ultimately the unknowable. Yet his phenomenal ability to hold the tension of opposites, to embrace uncertainty, ambiguity, and paradox, was a critical characteristic of his genius.

The theme of the tension of opposites appears repeatedly in his work and grew in intensity through his lifetime. Writing on the ideal subjects for painters in the *Treatise on Painting*, he conjures up images of profound contrast: "... the essences of animals of all kinds, of plants, fruits, landscapes, rolling plains, crumbling mountains, fearful and terrible places which strike terror into the spectator; and, again pleasant places, sweet and delightful with meadows of many colored flowers bent by the gentle motion of the wind which turns back to look at them as it floats on. . . ."

Leonardo's search for beauty led him to explore ugliness in many forms. His sketches of battles, grotesques,

"To the medieval mind the possibility of doubt did not exist."

—WILLIAM MANCHESTER

"That painter who has no doubts will achieve little."



The tension of opposites is the central theme of his compelling Virgin of the Rocks, commissioned in 1483. As Bramly comments: "Leonardo composed The Virgin of the Rocks around one organizing principle: that of contrast, of opposition. The peaceful group of the mother, the children, and the almost smiling angel is surrounded by a confused background that suggests the end of the world. . . . The plants are flowering from a barren rock. The Immaculate Conception, Leonardo seems to be saying, paves the way for the agony of the cross. What ought to be a source of joy carries the seeds of Calvary."

Study of a Nutcracker Man and
Beautiful Youth by Leonardo da Vinci



and deluges often appear next to sublime evocations of flowers and beautiful youths. When he spotted a deformed or freakish character on the street, he would often spend the entire day following that person to record the details. On one occasion he held a dinner party for the most grotesque-looking people in town. He regaled them with joke after joke until their features became even more contorted through the effect of hysterical laughter. Then when the party ended, he stayed up all night sketching their faces. Kenneth Clark explains Leonardo's curiosity about ugliness by comparing it to "the motives which led men to carve gargoyles on the gothic cathedrals. Gargoyles were the complements to saints; Leonardo's caricatures were complementary to his untiring search for ideal beauty."

Leonardo's contemplation of opposition and paradox took many forms. It is expressed in the love of puns, jokes, and humor and in the fascination with riddles, puzzles, and knots recorded throughout his notebooks. His paintings, sketches, doodles, and designs for embroidery, parquet floors, and porcelain tiles frequently express the motif of knots, braids, and scrolls. As Vasari observes,

Leonardo spent much time on designing a pattern of knots, so interlinked that the thread could be followed from one end to the other, de-

scribing a circle. There is an engraving of one of these beautiful and complicated designs, with the inscription "Leonardus Vinci Academia."

Leonardo's fascination with the infinity shape is more than just his delight at the play of words with his name (patterns of knots were known in his day as *fantasie de vinci*). Bramly calls them "symbols of both the infinity and the unity of the world." The knot was Da Vinci's playful expression of the paradox and mystery that emerged as his knowledge deepened.

As he learned more about everything, Leonardo was plunged deeper into ambiguity. And as his awareness of mystery and opposition deepened, his expressions of paradox became more profound. This is strikingly evident in his haunting evocation of Saint John. Kenneth Clark comments:

St. John the Baptist was the forerunner of the Truth and the Light. And what is the inevitable precursor of truth? A question. Leonardo's St. John is the eternal question mark, the enigma of creation. He thus becomes Leonardo's familiar—the spirit which stands at his shoulder and propounds unanswerable riddles. He has the smile of a sphinx, and the power of an obsessive shape. I have pointed out how this gesture—which itself has the rising rhythm of an interrogative—appears throughout Leonardo's work. Here it is quintessential.

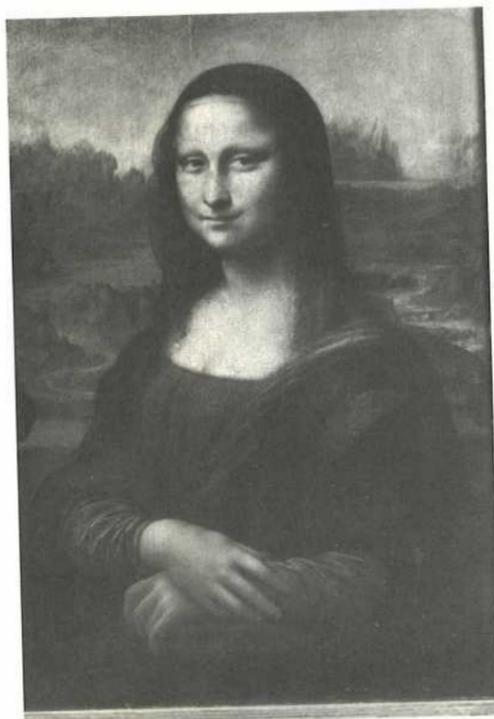
Of course, Mona Lisa is Leonardo's supreme expression of paradox. The mystery of her smile has unleashed torrents of ink through the ages. Bramly calls her "a womanly equivalent of Christ." Walter Pater, author of the classic text *The Renaissance*, describes her as "a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by little cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions." Sigmund Freud wrote that the *Mona Lisa* is "... the most perfect representation of the contrasts dominating the love-life of the woman. ..." Mona Lisa's smile lies on the cusp of good and evil, compassion and cruelty, seduction and inno-



St. John the Baptist by Leonardo da Vinci

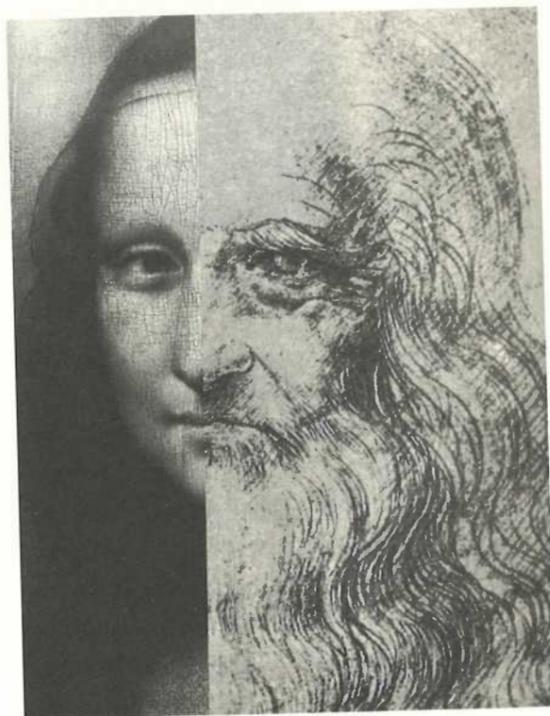
cence, the fleeting and the eternal. She is the Western equivalent of the Chinese symbol of yin and yang.

E. H. Gombrich, author of *The Story of Art*, helps us begin to understand how Leonardo achieved this supreme evocation of the essence of paradox, Sfumato: "The blurred outline and mellowed colours... allow one form to merge with another always leaving something to our imagination. ... Everyone who has ever tried to draw or scribble a face knows that what we call its expression rests mainly in two features: the corners of the mouth and the corners of the eyes. Now it is precisely these parts which



The Mona Lisa

Dr. Lillian Schwartz: Juxtaposition of
Leonardo's self-portrait and the Mona Lisa



Leonardo has left deliberately indistinct, by letting them merge into a soft shadow. That is why we are never quite certain in what mood Mona Lisa is really looking at us. . . ." Gombrich points out the purposeful discrepancies in the two sides of the portrait and the "almost miraculous rendering of the living flesh" that add to its uncanny effect.

Of the many mysteries surrounding Mona Lisa perhaps the greatest is the question of her true identity. Is she, as biographer Giorgio Vasari claimed thirty years after Leonardo's death, the wife of Francesco del Giocondo? Is Mona Lisa really Isabella d'Este, marchioness of Mantua, as Dr. Raymond Stites argues in *Sublimations of Leonardo da Vinci*?

Or could she be, as others have suggested, Pacifica Brandano, a companion of Giuliano de' Medici's or perhaps a mistress of Charles d'Amboise's? Or is she a composite of all the women Leonardo had ever known: his mother, the wives and mistresses of noblemen, the peasant women and streetwalkers that he spent hours observing and sketching? Or is she, as some have suggested, an extraordinary self-portrait?

Fascinating evidence for this last thesis is offered by Dr. Lillian Schwartz of Bell Laboratories, and author of *The Computer Artists Handbook*. Applying sophisticated computer modeling with precision measurements of scale and alignment, Schwartz compared the *Mona Lisa* with the only extant self-portrait of the artist, drawn in red chalk in 1518. As she describes it, "Juxtaposing the images was all that was needed to fuse them: the relative locations of the nose, mouth, chin, eyes and forehead in one precisely matched the other. Merely flipping up the corner of the mouth would produce the mysterious smile. . . ."

Schwartz concludes that the model for this most famous of paintings is none other than the maestro himself.

Perhaps the *Mona Lisa* was Leonardo's soul portrait. Regardless of Mona Lisa's true identity, she illuminates the essential place of paradox in Da Vinci's worldview.

SFUMATO AND YOU

In the past, a high tolerance for uncertainty was a quality to be found only in great geniuses like Leonardo. As change accelerates, we now find that ambiguity multiplies, and illusions of certainty become more difficult to maintain. The ability to thrive with ambiguity must become part of our everyday lives. Poise in the face of paradox is a key not only to effectiveness, but to sanity in a rapidly changing world.

Rate yourself on a scale of one to ten on tolerance for ambiguity, with one representing complete maniacal need for certainty at all times, and ten representing an enlightened Taoist priest or Leonardo. What behaviors could you change to move up one point on the scale? The exercises that follow are designed to help you strengthen your powers of Sfumato. To get the most from the exercises, spend some time with the self-assessment questions first.

Sfumato: Self-Assessment

- I am comfortable with ambiguity.
- I am attuned to the rhythms of my intuition.
- I thrive with change.
- I see the humor in life every day.
- I have a tendency to "jump to conclusions."
- I enjoy riddles, puzzles, and puns.
- I usually know when I am feeling anxious.
- I spend sufficient time on my own.
- I trust my gut.
- I can comfortably hold contradictory ideas in my mind.
- I delight in paradox and am sensitive to irony.
- I appreciate the importance of conflict in inspiring creativity.



SFUMATO: APPLICATION AND EXERCISES

CURIOSITÀ EQUALS UNCERTAINTY

Return to your list of your ten most important life questions from the *Curiosità* chapter. Which ones cause you the greatest sense of uncertainty or ambivalence? Are there paradoxes at the heart of any of these questions? Working in your notebook, try your hand at some abstract art. Sketch the feeling of uncertainty generated by a particular question from your *Curiosità* list. Then experiment with gestures and perhaps an improvisational dance that express that feeling; if you are not sure what to do, then you have got the idea. What music would you choose to accompany your ambiguity dance?



MAKE FRIENDS WITH AMBIGUITY

In your notebook, list and briefly describe three situations from your life, past or present, where ambiguity reigns. You might, for example, remember waiting to hear if you were accepted at the college of your choice, or wondering about the possibility of downsizing in your organization, or considering the future of a significant relationship.

Describe the feeling of ambiguity. Where in your body do you experience it? If ambiguity had a shape, a

color, a sound, a taste, a smell, what would they be? How do you respond to feelings of ambiguity? How are ambiguity and anxiety related?

Observe Anxiety

For many people ambiguity equals anxiety; but most people, unless they have worked intensively with a good psychotherapist, do not know when they are anxious. They react to anxiety with some form of automatic avoidance behavior such as talking excessively, pouring a drink, reaching for a cigarette, or having an obsessive fantasy. To thrive with uncertainty and ambiguity, we must learn, first of all, to know when we are anxious. As we become conscious of our anxiety we can learn to accept it, experience it, and free ourselves from limiting compulsions of thought and action.

Describe the feeling of anxiety. Are there different types of anxiety? Where in your body do you experience anxiety? If anxiety had a shape, a color, a sound, a taste, a smell, what would they be? How do you respond to feelings of anxiety? Make "anxiety" a theme for a day. Record your observations in your notebook.

Monitor Intolerance for Ambiguity

Count the number of times per day that you use an absolute, such as "totally," "always," "certainly," "must," "never," and "absolutely."

Note the way you close conversations. Do you usually end with a statement or a question?



CULTIVATE CONFUSION ENDURANCE

The Sfumato principle touches the essence of being. Just as day follows night, our capacity for joy is born in sorrow. We are each the center of a unique and special universe and totally insignificant specks of cosmic dust. Of all the polarities, none is more daunting than life and death. The shadow of death gives life its potential for meaning.

You can develop your Da Vincian powers by nurturing "confusion endurance," sharpening your senses in the face of paradox and embracing creative tension. Practice the Contemplation exercise with any of the following paradoxes:

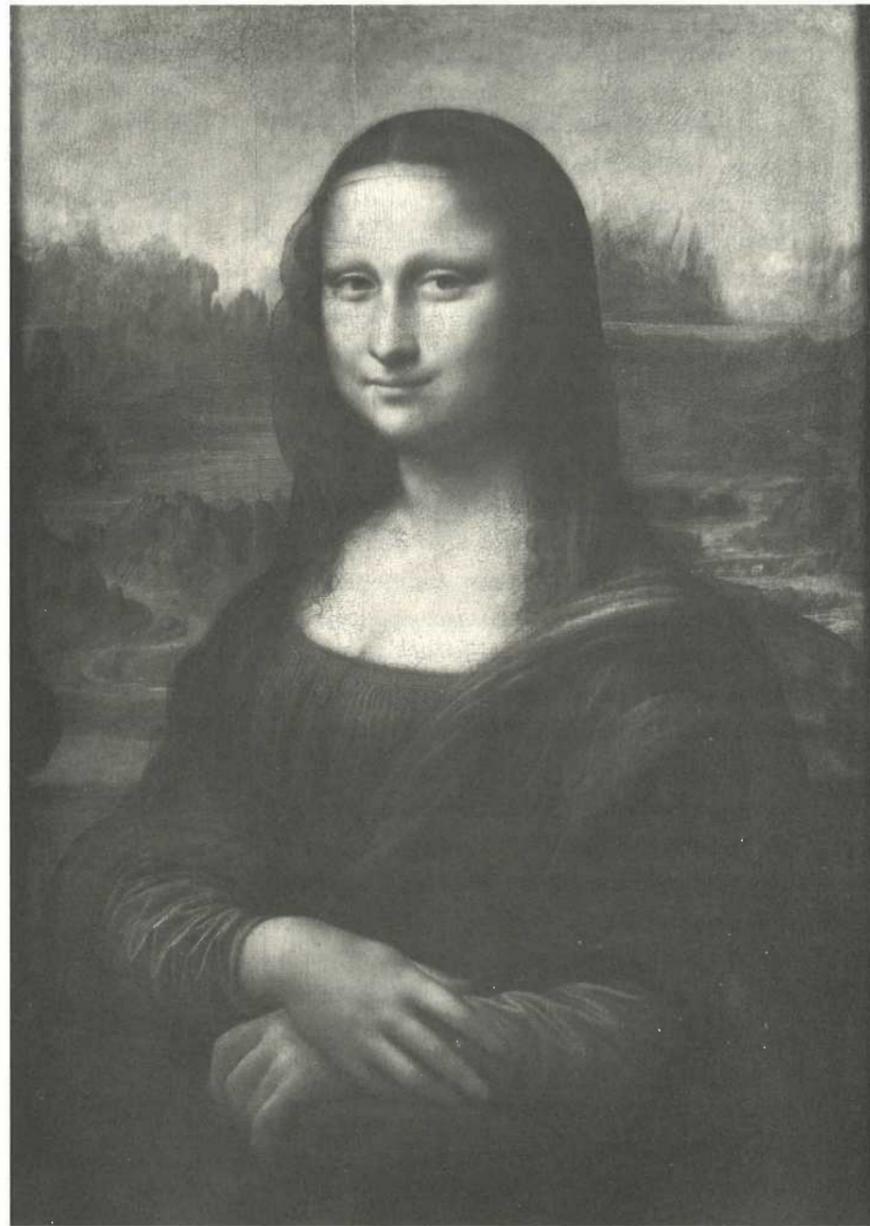


- ♦ Joy and Sorrow—Think of the saddest moments of your life. Which moments were most joyful? What is the relationship between these states? Do you ever feel joy and sorrow simultaneously? Leonardo once wrote, "The highest happiness becomes the cause of unhappiness. . . ." Do you agree? Is the opposite true?
- ♦ Intimacy and Independence—In your closest relationships what is the connection between intimacy and independence? Can you have one without the other? Does this connection ever inspire anxiety?
- ♦ Strength and Weakness—List at least three of your strengths as a person. List three or more of your weaknesses. How are the qualities in your lists related?
- ♦ Good and Evil—Is it possible to be good without acknowledging and understanding one's own impulses toward evil, what Jung called the "Shadow"? What

happens when people are unconscious of or deny the shadow? How can you recognize and accept your own prejudice, hate, anger, jealousy, envy, greed, pride, and sloth without acting them out?

- ♦ Change and Constancy—Note three of the most significant changes you have observed in your lifetime. Note three things that remain constant. Is the idea that "the more things change, the more they remain the same" a valid aphorism or a vapid cliché? Here are some of the maestro's thoughts on the issue: "Constancy may be symbolized by the phoenix which, knowing that by nature it must be resuscitated, has the constancy to endure the burning flames which consume it, and then it rises anew."
- ♦ Humility and Pride—Think of the proudest moments of your life. Remember the times you felt most humble. Aim to re-create your most profound feelings of genuine humility and true pride. How are these feelings different? Are there any unexpected similarities between humility and pride? Are these qualities opposites?
- ♦ Goals and Process—Think of an important goal that you have accomplished. Describe the process you followed in achieving that goal. Have you ever achieved a success without experiencing fulfillment? How do goal and process, doing and being, relate? Does the end justify the means? To live a successful and fulfilling life, must one: a) be 100 percent committed to achieving clearly defined goals; b) recognize that the process of living every day, the daily quality of life, is of greatest importance; or c) both a and b?
- ♦ Life and Death—Make up your own exercise for this one.

*Leonardo on life and death:
"Behold now the hope or
desire of going back to
one's own country or
returning to primal chaos,
like that of the moth to
the light, of the man who
with perpetual longing
always looks forward with
joy to each new spring and
each new summer . . .
deeming that the things he
longs for are too slow in
coming; and who does not
perceive that he is longing for
his own destruction. But this
longing is in its quintessence
the spirit of the elements,
which, finding itself
imprisoned within the life of
the human body, desires
continually to return to its
source. And I have you know
that this same longing is
in its quintessence
inherent in nature. . . ."*



MEDITATE ON MONA

Serge Bramly refers to a Chinese poet of the Sung dynasty who observed that the three most wasteful and disturbing things in the world were to witness poorly educated youths, mishandling of fine tea, and great art go unappreciated. Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* is so familiar that it is rarely seen. Sit with Mona for a while. Wait for your analytical mind to calm down and breathe in her essence. Note your responses. (When you visit Paris, go to the Louvre when it opens at 9:00 A.M. and head straight for a relatively private audience with the real *Mona*.)

EMBODY MONA'S SMILE

Experiment with embodying Mona's facial expression, especially the famous smile. Note how you feel. Responses from people who have tried this exercise include:

- ♦ "I feel like my mind is in two places at once."
- ♦ "When I smile like that, I feel freer inside."
- ♦ "It makes me feel like one of the cognoscenti."
- ♦ "I felt an immediate transformation—everything was suddenly completely different."

Now go back to the most anxiety-producing questions from your *Curiosità* list. Only this time when you think about each question, embody Mona's smile. Does your thinking change when you look from Mona's perspective? Record your observations in your notebook.



INCUBATION AND INTUITION

Great musicians claim that their art comes to life in the spaces between notes. Master sculptors point to the space around their work as the secret of its power. Similarly, the spaces between your conscious efforts provide a key to creative living and problem solving. These spaces allow perceptions, ideas, and feelings to incubate.

When Leonardo was working on *The Last Supper*, he spent many days on the scaffold, painting from dawn until dusk; then, without warning, he would take a break. The prior of Santa Maria delle Grazie who contracted for his services was not amused. As Vasari noted, "The prior of the church entreated Leonardo with tiresome persistence to complete the work, since it seemed strange to him to see how Leonardo sometimes passed half a day at a time lost in thought, and he would have preferred Leonardo, just like the labourers hoeing in the garden, never to have laid down his brush." Vasari explains that the prior complained to the duke, who questioned Leonardo about his working habits. He tells us that Leonardo persuaded the duke that "the greatest geniuses sometimes accomplish more when they work less."

Clearly, Leonardo didn't underestimate his stature; yet pride in his

"The eyes have the lustre and moisture always seen in living people, while around them are the lashes and all the reddish tones which cannot be produced without the greatest care. The eyebrows could not be more natural. . . . The nose seems lifelike with its beautiful pink and tender nostrils. The mouth, with its opening joining the red of the lips to the flesh of the face, seems to be real flesh rather than paint. Anyone who looked very attentively at the hollow of her throat would see her pulse beating."

—GIORGIO VASARI ON VIEWING THE MONA LISA

SFUMATO FOR PARENTS

Young children are not ready to deal with the profound paradoxes of life. They do, however, love riddles and mysteries. Nurture Sfumato with games, puzzles, and stories. For example, tell your kids the same bedtime stories, but make up different endings each time. In addition to stimulating your own imaginative powers, you will be encouraging their delight in the unknown.

abilities and confidence in the rhythms of incubation were balanced with humility and delightful humor. Vasari relates that the maestro explained to the duke that he still had two faces to complete: Christ and Judas. The face of Christ, which ultimately was to remain unfinished, was a challenge that Leonardo felt to be beyond his powers, "for he was unwilling to seek a model on earth and unable to presume that his imagination could conceive of the beauty and celestial grace required of the divinity incarnate." As for the face of Judas, Leonardo explained to the duke that it would be a great challenge to find a model for one "so wicked as to betray his Lord the Creator of the World. Nonetheless, he would search for a model for this second face, but if in the end he could not find anything better, there was always the head of the prior."

Although your boss may not accept the idea that "the greatest geniuses sometimes accomplish more when they work less," the art of incubation is, nevertheless, essential to actualizing your creative potential. Almost everyone has experienced "sleeping on a problem" and awakening with a solution. But incubation is most effective when you alternate, as Leonardo did, between periods of intense, focused work and rest. Without periods of intense, focused work, there is nothing to be incubated.

Discovering and learning to trust your incubatory rhythms is a simple secret of accessing your intuition and creativity. Sometimes incubation yields an obvious insight, or Aha! But frequently the fruits of unconscious

work are subtle and easy to overlook. The muses demand attention to the delicate nuances of thought, listening for the faint whispers of shy inner voices.

Neuroscientists estimate that your unconscious database outweighs the conscious on an order exceeding ten million to one. This database is the source of your creative potential. In other words, a part of you is much smarter than you are. The wisest people regularly consult that smarter part. You can, too, by making space for incubation.

TAKE TIME FOR SOLITUDE AND RELAXATION



Where are you when you get your best ideas? Over the past twenty years, I've asked thousands of people this question. The most frequent answers: "resting in bed," "walking in nature," "listening to music while driving in my car," and "relaxing in the shower or bath." Almost no one claims to get their best ideas at work.

What happens when you walk in the woods, rest in bed, or luxuriate in the shower that isn't happening in the workplace? Solitude and relaxation. Most people experience their breakthrough ideas when they are relaxed and by themselves.

Although Da Vinci loved exchanging ideas with others, he knew that his most creative insights came when he was alone. He wrote, "The painter must be solitary. . . . For if you are alone you are completely yourself, but if you are accompanied by a single companion you are half yourself."

Nurture Sfumato by taking time for solitude. Take a little time, at least once or twice a week, to go for a walk or just sit quietly by yourself.

"TAKE A LITTLE RELAXATION"

Many of us spend our days working hard in a focused, "left-brained" fashion. We sometimes get so involved in projects that we begin to lose perspective. You can increase your enjoyment and effectiveness when working or studying by taking breaks every hour or so. Modern psychological research shows that when you study or work for an hour, and then take a complete break for ten minutes, your recall for the material you have been working on is higher at the end of the ten-minute break than it was at the end of the hour. Psychologists call this phenomenon the Reminiscence Effect. In his *Treatise on Painting*, Da Vinci counseled ". . . it is well that you should often leave off work and take a little relaxation because when you come back to it you are a better judge. . . ." Follow the maestro's advice and build the occasional ten-minute "brain break" into your busy schedule. Try listening to jazz or

Dr. Candace Pert, author of *Molecules of Emotion*, on the mind of your body: "Your brain is extremely well integrated with the rest of your body at a molecular level, so much so that the term *mobile brain* is an apt description of the psychosomatic network through which intelligent information travels from one system to another." Pert adds, "Every second, a massive information exchange is occurring in your body. Imagine each of these messenger systems possessing a specific tone, humming a signature tune, rising and falling, waxing and waning, binding and unbinding. . . ." Intuition is the art of listening, with an inner ear, to the rhythms and melodies of your own "body music."

classical music, creative doodling, meditation, or stretching exercises to promote relaxation and incubation. In addition to hourly breaks, be sure to enjoy some kind of weekly "Sabbath" and to take a true vacation every year.

TRUST YOUR GUT

Bring more attention to your everyday hunches and intuitions. Try writing them down in your notebook and then checking your accuracy. By monitoring your daily intuitions, you hone their accuracy.



Cultivating an accurate, reliable inner guidance system requires listening to your body. Comments such as "My gut tells me otherwise," "I just know it in my bones," "I can feel it in the pit of my stomach," and "I know in my heart of hearts that it must be true" reflect the body-centered nature of intuition.

When you take time for solitude—walking in nature, driving in your car, or just lying in bed—remember to listen to your bones and check in with your heart of hearts. Try the following exquisitely simple exercise, one or two times every day, for accessing the subtle nuances of your intuition:

Enjoy a few deep exhalations.

Soften your belly.

Be receptive.

SFUMATO AT WORK

In the 1980s, the American Management Association published a study concluding that the most successful managers were distinguished by "high tolerance for ambiguity and intuitive decision-making skill." Now, as the pace of change accelerates, "tolerance" for ambiguity is no longer sufficient; ambiguity must be embraced and enjoyed.

In *The Logic of Intuitive Decision Making*, Professor Weston Agor reported his discovery, made through extensive interviews, that senior executives overwhelmingly pointed to a failure to heed their own intuition as the prime cause of their worst decisions. As we begin the twenty-first century, information threatens to overwhelm us with sheer volume. Intuition is more important than ever.

The bottom line: Embrace ambiguity and trust your gut.