

Beth Pickens

MAKE

YOUR

ART

NO

MATTER

WHAT

Moving Beyond Creative Hurdles

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Beth Pickens


CHRONICLE BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO

**For Ali Liebegott, all Tier Ones, and every
artist.**

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DEAR READER,

I love artists. You are my favorite people and my life is more livable because of your work. I'm so grateful for what you make and put into the world. All my life, art has facilitated my ability to have feelings during disorienting grief, challenged me to grow even when I didn't want to, introduced me to crucial information I couldn't find elsewhere, and helped me become more of myself. The full scope of human emotion becomes available to me and is then intensified through art. Art tells me I am not alone in any feeling, thought, or experience. Art has saved my life and the lives of many of my loved ones.

After I finished graduate school in counseling psychology, I assumed I would become a licensed therapist working with the general public—but I noticed this growing force pulling me toward artists. I needed to be immersed in art and artist communities. Besides my graduate school training, my twenties comprised women's studies and gender studies, reproductive-justice organizing, queer activism, disability work, and a full-time job in a university women's center. I have always been deeply devoted to a constellation of social issues, trying to commit myself to them all. Over time, I became burned out by so much social justice work, but artists and arts advocacy never burned me out. Art was, for me, a consistent way back into working for change. Engaging with art, listening to artists talk about their work, and reading about art histories fueled me, replenishing my emotional coffers when they were drained by our dominant culture and political system.

Artwork reflects the lived experience, imagination, and ideas of the artist. Because I tend to seek out work by marginalized artists, the art I love often reflects politicized experiences. Works by women, queer and trans artists, artists of color, artists with disabilities, and those who have experienced trauma and displacement necessarily challenge the normative story of our world because they reflect a perspective that differs from the default artistic gaze (historically assumed to be white, male, cisgender). In every realm of community building, justice seeking, and social change work, I find artists furthering and transforming conversations, illuminating new ways to think, feel, connect, and live.

It occurred to me that artists are central and active throughout activism, critical thought, and community building, and that serving artists could enable me to approach all aspects of justice work in one lifetime. By supporting many artists'

practices, I could be connected to people's work for justice and equity across many urgent concerns. The artists I serve go on to impact much larger audiences and communities than I do as one person.

The word *artist* is fraught for many people, particularly for people with marginalized identities and experiences who never saw themselves reflected in any professional art contexts. It's loaded with meaning and cultural implications, and some people may shy away from using it as an identifier. Perhaps they don't make money from their art or don't spend what they believe to be enough time on their practice. The world showed them that art was only for white people, wealthy people, men, people who grew up around art. They didn't go to art school and they don't consider their opportunities to perform, exhibit, or present their work professional enough. Maybe they've never had an opportunity to share their work with the public. No one has paid them for their creative work and they fear their work isn't good. Their families and friends scoff at the concept of being an artist, or perhaps artists with *real* careers surround them. These are just a few of the reasons I've heard from artists as to why they don't use the identifier. Making the art seems more certain than calling oneself an artist. Often, it is easier to *do* than to *be*.

What is my definition of an artist? The quick and dirty is this: Artists are people who make art. My deeper understanding is that artists are people who are profoundly compelled to make their creative work, and when they are distanced from their practice, their life quality suffers. Making their work is a way to take care of themselves, communicate, process information, engage a spiritual interior, or strengthen their relationship to themselves and others. That's a tall order though, and it's totally fine if you relate to the short definition: Artists make art.

For the purposes of this book, I am using *artist* as the word for people who have creative practices throughout and beyond every nameable discipline. This includes, but is not limited to, people who make music, visual work, sound, media, and experiences, and those who write, illustrate, design, dance, perform, cook, organize, and bring people together for transformation. You might not relate to the identity of artist, but I want you to consider using the word while you read this book. Whatever baggage or fears are related to calling yourself an artist, table them while you read. You're an artist if you make art. It's likely this book appeals to you *because* you're an *artist*, so embrace the word for now. Throughout the subsequent chapters, I will unpack a number of major roadblocks in artists' lives, including those that dissuade you from identifying as such.

I believe artists have three fundamental needs in regard to their creative life. I challenge you to tend to these needs while you use this book. First, artists need to make their work, so please be sure to spend time each week in a creative practice, whatever that means for you. Even a half an hour can be significant. Prioritize some time each week to be with yourself in this way, just as you make time to take care of your body, your home, your pets, your finances, and other people. Next, artists need a community of other active artists who want good things for themselves and one another. Relationships to other artists are critical to your practice and this will show up in multiple chapters throughout this book. Please maintain contact, make plans, and spend time with other artists. Last, artists must take in art and information, in every form. Spending time with others' work will do for your creative interior what vitamins do for your body. Go out into your world and have experiences.

At this point in my career, I have spent thousands and thousands of hours in consultation with, and raised millions of dollars for, artists. The artists I have worked with over the past decade come from every identity, discipline, phase of career, financial reality, and family system one could imagine. The following perspectives, anecdotes, lessons, and solutions come straight from our work together; this book reflects the lives and words of hundreds of different artists. I could not have written this book without their voices in my head, their lives on my mind. Though every artist's constellation of dreams and fears is unique, their obstacles are often similar. This is how I've sourced the focus for each of the twelve chapters. I've selected the challenges that come up most frequently in my one-on-one consultation with artists and mapped out both the problems and the solutions my clients and I have identified.

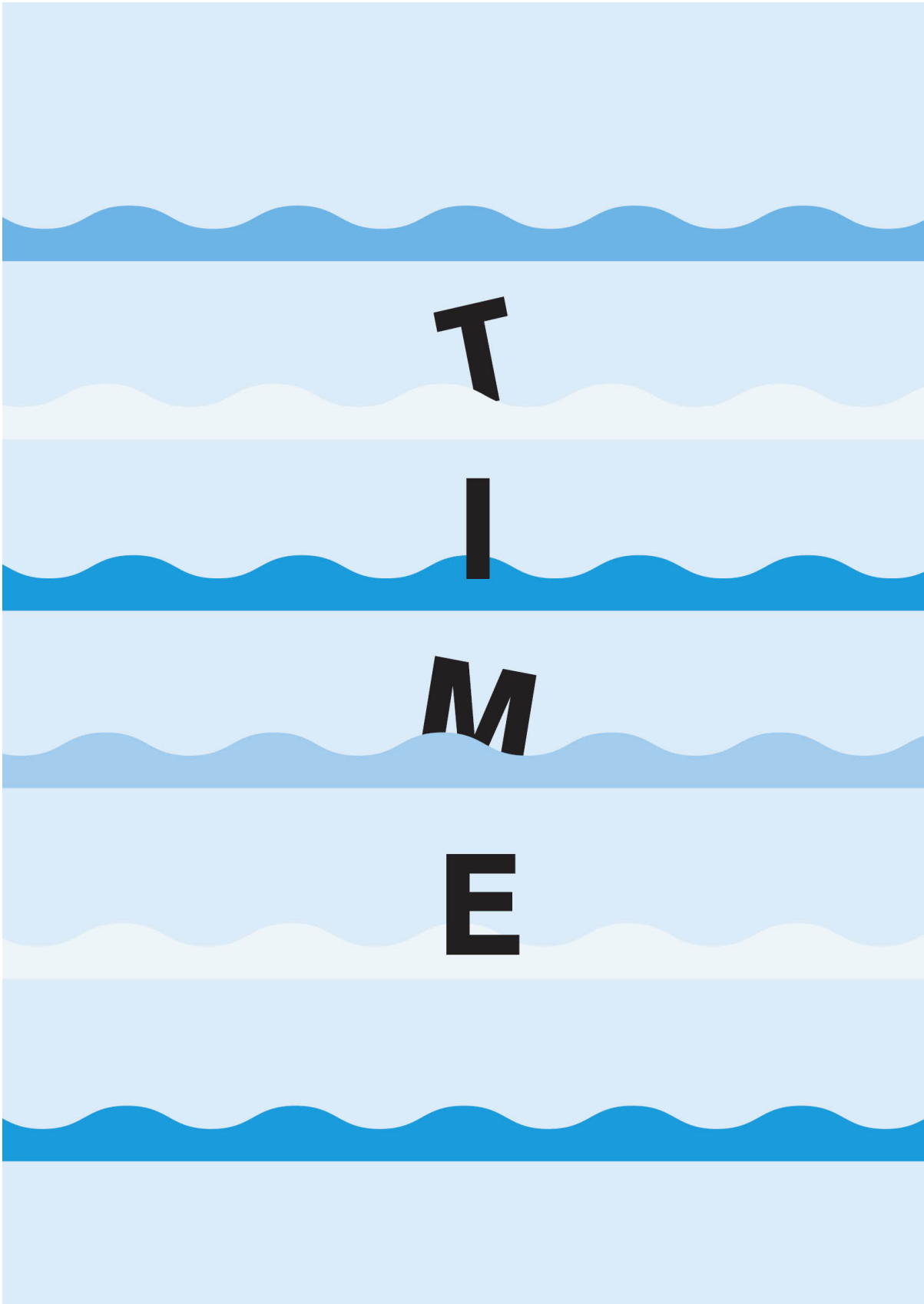
I need to come clean and admit to you that I do not identify as an artist. I have done many creative projects throughout my life and several of these I was pretty good at and really enjoyed. But I discovered a distinction between my experience of art making and that of every artist I've worked with. I do not have the deep compulsion, the crucial need to write or make any kind of work. When I spend great swaths of time distanced from a creative project, my life doesn't suffer. I write because it's part of my job, and I want to offer my services far beyond what my one-to-one consultation practice can accommodate—hence this book. I do not have a compulsion to write, and, when I don't write, I don't feel an internal drifting or a sense that something is wrong. (I just get anxious about my deadline!) But I do need a lot of art and I always have. This is what puts me in a symbiotic relationship to you;

I need your art, so I do professional work that helps you with your art so that I can benefit from the outcome. It's an exchange, so the agreement is this: I'll keep helping artists and you keep making your work and putting it in the world. Deal?

The wisdom assembled in this book comes from many parts of my professional and personal lives. I've included insights and knowledge from Jewish tradition, 12-step programs, counseling psychology as a field of study and as a mode of practice, my own years of talk therapy, other self-help sources, feminism, hundreds of books, thousands of hours of podcasts, all the art I've experienced in my lifetime, queer community, Jewish community, the artists in my circle, friends, friends of friends, and the hundreds of brilliant artists with whom I consult.

As with any source of help and healing, take what you like and leave the rest. Some content may be salient now, while other parts may become relevant another time in your life. When you encounter anything that does not resonate with you, let it be an invitation to build upon my text, adding your own thoughts and accumulated wisdom to the reading process. You bring your own experience to this book; in this way, you and I collaborate to invent the creative life you want.

Each chapter of this book is a deep dive into a topic with which many artists struggle. I chose this specific set from the dozens of issues frequently brought up in sessions. I had to narrow it down to keep the book a reasonable length, so when you notice crucial subjects excluded from this book, just wait for the next one! You can scan the chapter titles and flip to one that reflects your current questions. Or you can read it straight through. You'll find my recommended resources at the back of the book. Keep this book and revisit it whenever you need. And of course, no matter what is happening in your life, please keep making art.



CHAPTER ONE

Time is a hostage to the powers of perception.

—HAN SHAOGONG, *A DICTIONARY OF MAQIAO*

I visited the Samuel Oschin Planetarium at Los Angeles's Griffith Park Observatory with my wife, who is a writer and painter. We settled into the cooled, round room to watch *Centered in the Universe*, a digitally animated, live-narration show about our place in time and in the universe, which, we were informed by the narrator as he darkened the lights, is an estimated 13.8 billion years old. Our human lives, we were reminded, are minute fractions of specks in an incomprehensible time line.

Laughing out loud, I slunk down into my cozy seat, feeling ease and relief at the news that I am only a speck in time, when I heard my wife heave a guttural, existential sigh as she rubbeded her hands up and down her face. It was the involuntary expression of what I call "Speck Syndrome," the primal reaction one has when they are reminded that their human life is an infinitesimal moment in time. My wife often suffers from Speck Syndrome. I hear similar existential sighs in my office daily. How can an artist possibly tend to everything they want in one brief lifetime? How can they make all the art they need to make?

I don't suffer from Speck Syndrome; I enjoy it. I find comfort and perspective in thinking about death every day as part of my spiritual interior. Death acceptance as an ongoing practice helps me grapple with time in both conceptual and literal ways; I find myself more willing and able to prioritize how I spend my life and with whom. Death acceptance inspires me to reflect on who I want to be and how I want to feel. Remembering my mortality gives me the needed motivation to make change, hold everything more lightly, and have compassion for myself and other people. I am less confounded by and anxious about time on the days that I consciously remember that I will die one day. Here is my thesis, and it will not be the last time that I tell you this: You are going to die. I will, too. We have to make choices about time because we have the finite gift of one existence. You should make your art.

None of us knows the span of life we'll have; we have to consider our days, one at a time, while continually moving toward a life we want for ourselves. Everyone feels the constraints of time, fears and dreads its passage, and grapples with a changing relationship to it as we grow older. Our lifetimes are specks in the universe, but they are the longest and only spans of time we will ever know. Annie Dillard wrote in *The Writing Life*, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing." When I am troubled by her notion, I remember two propositions: I can change my attitude about how I spend my days, and I can change the content of my days. Pick one or both.

Artists have specific trials with time, which I will unpack. Some are from external forces, but many are internal, self-created. But, artist or not, most of us struggle with time. We believe we don't have enough time for what we want and need to do. Our time seems to be taken up with obligations and work, which may feel pointless. Time feels wasted. Time seems to elude us as we get absorbed in tasks or disappear into escapism. Research supports the cognitive impression that time speeds up as one ages; our later decades whizz by while childhood and teenage years slog on endlessly. (I grew up before the internet; maybe childhood feels speedier now.)

We feel busy. Our economic climate trains us to believe that time is valuable, but just financially so. Our waking hours are supposed to be productive, and productivity should be monetized. Friends and clients tell me they feel like they should be doing *something*, all the time. Freelance and self-employed people, which artists frequently are, struggle with the nagging thought, "I should be working." Unplanned downtime becomes a stressor. Then there is the unprecedented volume of content in front of us, always. Digital communication, the feeling of ubiquitous availability through text, email and social media, and screens at every turn inviting us to engage or consume—*we feel so busy*.

NOT ENOUGH TIME FOR YOUR ART

The most frequent issue with time for artists is the belief they don't have enough time for their art practice or as much time as they would like to devote to it. Artists with wildly differing obligations, family expectations, energy levels, scheduling habits, and work lives report this to me. That is how I know this specific time issue isn't correlated solely to reality; it's also linked to perception. Some artists are juggling childcare and full-time jobs and must carve out and protect hours each

week for their practice. Others have more open schedules, but anxiety and fear lead them to fill up their time with other tasks, away from their art. In those cases, we have to build a schedule and a habit of maintaining weekly practice hours. Neither example is good or bad; external circumstances and internal wiring influence each artist's relationship to time. My priority is to get to the bottom of it with each of them and help them prioritize their art a little more. What we feed with our time and focus will grow.

HOW ARE YOU SPENDING YOUR DAYS?

Do you know how you spend a typical week? Early on with a new client, I ask them to talk me through an average week, and most artists can't do it. I can't either, truthfully. I have to look at my online calendar to know what I was doing only yesterday. Though I know they might not be able to tell me, I ask the question anyway, because I want to talk about consciously making decisions about time. And before we can make deliberate choices, we need to know what's already happening.

You may be able to identify big chunks of time spent at jobs, running errands, commuting, or minding children. Depending on the model, your phone may even tell you how much time you've spent on it each week and precisely what you were doing. Terrifying! You are probably aware of which TV shows you've binged and how much time you do or don't spend cooking. But there are many unaccounted for hours and these hours are valuable for artists. Those chunks of time you don't recall? Those can be reclaimed for your art.

Artists have to fiercely guard time, both from the outside world and from your individualized distractions, in order to create your work. Only you can hold your art practice as sacred. Unless they've hired you to do so, no one is going to ask you to make your art. In fact, the world will only try to pull you away from your creative practice. Earn more money, wash the dishes, volunteer at the kid's school, send thank you cards, take care of your body, do better social media, help in your community, and jeez, shouldn't you learn to grow food before the apocalypse?

Prioritizing your time begins with you, so it is something over which you have immediate power. You can make changes in how you spend time this week, experimenting with different configurations to determine what helps you guard time

for your practice and its needs. Keeping a time diary or using any time tracking tool is useful for people who have no idea where their time is going or who believe that there is zero time that can be made available for their art.

Carry a small notebook for seven days in which you record how you spend time, down to the fifteen-minute increment, starting with what time you woke up, what time you left your bed, and ending with what time you got into bed, and what time you think you fell asleep. It will be difficult to remember to do this for the first couple of days. Setting a timer for every fifteen minutes can help you get started. For large swaths of time—eight hours of sleeping, an hour driving to and from work, eight hours at your paid day job—you can record as portions. It's the in-between that is interesting for this exercise: what happens during that hourlong subway commute, the five hours between arriving at home from work and going to bed, the Sunday afternoon you don't recall.

Rather than overprogramming your life down to the minute, I want this exercise to open some time back up for you. By showing you the reality of how you spend a week, you may find opportunities for change. You can identify time that you want to redirect or see patterns that need to be broken, moments when you need some help in order to reclaim time.

TIME MYTHS

I Need Six Months Off

Artists wish for an expanse of time—a week, a month, a year—during which they could just focus on their art practice. No jobs, no kids, no pets, no cooking, or cleaning, or shopping. Someone to drop meals off at their door. Long days and nights in which their sole focus is their creative interior and making that manifest. This scenario sums up most artist retreats. The artist has a living and workspace. A chef's team is feeding the artist, even dropping the food at their door if the artist prefers solitude. Alone with their work, the artist's only purpose is to use their waking hours in service of their art.

The truth? Expanses of unstructured time are the enemy of most artists. When my clients arrive at their residencies, particularly those a month or longer, they often schedule an urgent consultation session. Unstructured time creates the conditions to feel anxiety, fear, and grief that remain contained, managed, or stuffed down

while a person lives their busy life in a familiar routine. Having eliminated that routine, they now feel a pressure to enjoy, be productive, or otherwise “make the most of” the opportunity. Suddenly, they believe this will be the last time they ever have such a gift of time, so they’d better not squander it. They tell me that the residency feels over before they even arrive! When the artist feels upset and anxious, guilt creeps in with the thought that this opportunity was wasted on them. “Why can’t I enjoy good things?” their brain demands. This is why “relaxing” vacations can be difficult for people.

How do we transition from hyper-structure to structureless-ness? It’s not as simple as it seems. Working in Los Angeles, I have many clients who are employed by the entertainment industry in a number of ways—producers, writers, prop masters, food stylists, caterers, art directors, wardrobe supervisors, and more. Artists can find lucrative—though exhausting—work in the industry, which allows them to be employed for part of the year, or in short, intensive bursts. Then, they can carve out weeks or months during which they are devoted to their practice. It sounds dreamy to people who don’t have such work lives. Yet these artists struggle intensely with their time off.

It’s unrealistic to expect that a span of open time will be the panacea to one’s issues with time. It is a shock to your system to go from sixty-hour work weeks to open days, unfurling before you. Most people benefit from structure, a shape to their weeks, especially when the days are open and flexible. Some artists create structure for themselves quite easily while others need help and outside accountability. To help my clients prepare for lengthy residencies or self-created time off from employment to focus on their art, we examine their relationship to time management, self-directed time, creating structures, and how they transition between employment and open time. What is it like for you to create your own structure? How do you interact with unstructured time?

I Can Do Everything

Full disclosure, this is the myth about time that haunts me most. I want thirty hours in my day, nine days in a week, and an extra month each year. I don’t want more time just for work, though I do love to work. I want time for more of everything: sleep, reading, learning, swimming, cooking, friends, traveling, art events, volunteering, earning more degrees, meditating, talking in my pets’ voices with my wife. I want to do far more in a day than is humanly possible. I think it’s my Gemini rising.

Years back, when my wife turned forty, I took her to visit Paris for the first time. We were both fairly broke then, so I really hustled to make this trip happen. I took extra work and saved. I found a Parisian friend-of-a-friend who would swap her 20th-Arrondissement apartment for our San Francisco Mission District one-bedroom. I organized a birthday party at home before we left, asking friends to give her cash in lieu of gifts. I baked a dozen pies, yes twelve, and invited over everyone who loves my wife. We have generous friends and that birthday pie party generated enough money to buy our flights. My suitcase was stuffed with seven guidebooks from the library; I left five others at home. I made multiple itineraries so we would have choices each day.

About four days into our trip, I found myself tearfully coaxing my wife out of the apartment. It was already noon and I needed to get going. We had multiple itineraries! My wife gently explained that vacation to her meant lazing in bed reading, smoking cigarettes and drinking tiny espressos at a Parisian café, and slowly deciding what art she felt like seeing that day. She was overwhelmed and exhausted by my itineraries, which—to this day—she describes as a “museum death march.” It was the first time I understood that I am a person who tries to cram too much into a day. I truly had had no idea before this moment! I didn’t feel busier than other people. I didn’t perceive myself as having more interests, energy, or desires. I just knew that my biggest fear about death is that I won’t have time to read every book before I die.

My brain tells me that I can and should do everything in a day that is on my to-do list, which, as you might imagine, is quite long and varied. I try, with every passing year, to un-busy my life because a week becomes unmanageable if I am left to my own devices. I am programmed to create stress by overcommitting and overscheduling.

I will always design a museum death march, beat a vacation into misery by packing too much in. I want and have a full life but must temper my inclination to overstuff my schedule, thereby rendering life unenjoyable and slightly tyrannical.

I have to prioritize. I cannot have everything I want in my life at the same time. It all cannot be crammed into the present; some things have to be put on the back burner or even sacrificed for other things. We have to make choices about what we want now and in the near future; what we feed is what will grow. That means we have to be willing to temporarily set aside some things, say no sometimes, and be realistic about how much time can be directed to different parts of our lives. I had to, for

example, let go of some things I really value in order to write this book. I didn't attend a couple of Jewish retreats that are important to me. I turned down many social events and art outings. I changed my consulting practice for the duration of writing. I said no to hosting beloved friends who wanted to visit (my office is the guest room).

I am learning to accommodate my ever-growing and shifting goals and interests. I have no idea how many years or decades I'll be privileged to live, but I have to accept that this day, this month, this year is finite, and I cannot stuff a lifetime's worth of adventure, love, and learning into it.

I Have Zero Time

A client sits across from me, arms crossed, and tells me resentfully and wearily that they have zero additional time for what they want. It's as if they're challenging me to find it for them. I know this archetype. I've *been* this archetype. My instinct is to hug them tightly, pet their head, and tell them that I understand how tired and frustrated they are. Instead, I breathe deeply, listening to and believing them. I know this kind of client perceives "zero time" to be true, and so, for them, it *is* true. Our brains can't get us out of the trouble our brains get us into.

I think gender socialization often, but not always, plays a role. People socialized as female for part or all of their lives are instructed—overtly and covertly—that they are responsible for everyone else and that focusing on their own needs and desires is selfish. Intellectually, they know this is not true, but deep in their guts they feel the pull to make sure everybody has what they need before they consider themselves. This is reinforced by culture, which then tells them what good, selfless moms, leaders, teachers, volunteers, daughters, neighbors, and friends they are. We're all familiar with this message: So-and-so is *such* a caring, generous person; she puts everybody before herself. That's a recipe for burnout, emotional breakdown, or worse.

This socialization, whether familial or cultural, can be compounded by the messaging artists receive that art is something they *get* to do. As if it's a hobby, a luxury, or a superfluous add-on to the Protestant work ethic that tells us to work a miserable job until we die. (Maybe that was just my family?) My point is that many artists have trouble identifying time to redirect to their art practice, because they are

doing too much, they need some help, and they don't know where or how to get it. If you're told your entire life that being a good person means putting yourself last and that focusing on your art is selfish, it is difficult to consciously prioritize your art.

For the client who tells me they have zero time, my initial response is, "You need some help from friends and family. You may be doing too much." These clients also have trouble asking for things, or it doesn't even occur to them that they can ask for help. In these cases, I like to go through the client's life carefully, identifying space that can be created: obligations to relinquish to someone else, moments they said yes when they meant no, perfection that can be softened into "good enough," responsibilities that can be more equitably distributed throughout the household, and friends who have offered to help over and over.

It is true that sometimes many facets of living converge to create an unwieldy, overburdened period of time. Illness and surgery in a family come to mind. Multiple deadlines hitting one after another. Holidays. Sometimes life is too busy and it's outside our control. But how often is life too busy by our own design?

Of course, there can be spans of our lives during which we simply have too much: raising kids, working a ton, getting through school, managing the household when a partner is unable or unwilling to help, caring for someone at the end of their life, going through divorce, moving, a financial crisis. Sometimes life feels impossible; what do you then? Acceptance and forgiving yourself will help. The confluence of factors that make life overwhelming will pass because change is inevitable. The kids will get older. You'll finish the degree. The divorce will be finalized. The financial crisis will resolve, in one way or another. Your creative practice is available anytime you want it, and it will be there for you on the other side of whatever is happening right now.

I Should Be Doing Something Else

Some artists tell me they are preoccupied with the thought that they are not using their time "right." No matter what they choose to focus on, they are troubled with the nagging thought that they are doing the wrong thing. Their time scarcity contributes to this anxiety; if they fear not having enough time, then time becomes a precious commodity that must never be wasted. Indecision about how to spend time or the persistent thought that one is doing the wrong thing really inhibits being present for one's life and practice.

What if there is no wrong thing, just the next thing? Only the present choice in front of us? We can transform indecision and anxious wondering by making a choice and accepting it. What if, whatever you choose at this moment, you are right where you are supposed to be?

TIME TACTICS

Jewish Wisdom

Rabbi and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel's 1951 classic text *The Sabbath* introduced me to Jewish concepts about time that shape my understanding of and how I talk about time with artists. Judaism, he explained, is a religion of time. Shabbat (the twenty-four-hour period from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown) creates an architecture of time. Rather than making things or places sacred, the tradition asks us to make time sacred. Jewish people are instructed to keep Shabbat by refraining from the world of money, work, and things, instead redirecting time to resting, religious study, spiritual ritual, and being with loved ones.

Though observant Jewish artists make up a small fraction of my consulting practice, I bring the concept of Shabbat to all the artists I work with. I ask them to choose a twenty-four-hour period every week from which they abstain from any work that could lead to making money, *including their art*. On this day, I instruct them, they can engage all the other selves they contain. They can tend to their bodies, relationships, homes, rest, leisure, and all else that becomes neglected through a week of living in late capitalism. By designating time each week for soul work and rest, we can connect to a spiritual interior that brings more meaning and joy to the rest of the week and the rest of our work.

My clients laugh incredulously at this proposition. A day every week when they don't do any work, not even their art? It sounds counterintuitive to all the reasons they came to me in the first place; they want *more* time for their art and here I am asking them to do none of it for a whole precious day each week. They insist they cannot do it, but I persist because I am pushy and I know what is on the other side of this experiment. When my clients make a habit of protecting one day each week from the world of money and working toward it, they tell me they feel more rested and energized for the week of working. They remember on a cellular level that they work in order to have a life, rather than live to work. What we feed will grow.

The history of US labor activism yielded workers forty-hour work weeks and the weekend, concepts we barely recognize now. Many artists have full-time jobs or put together a living through an assemblage of gigs and employment. The only time they have for their practice is the weekend or whatever days off they can string together. Yet I insist they adopt this practice of a twenty-four-hour Sabbath from the world of work because it will reorganize their thinking and priorities. The weekly rest from work can restore joy and meaning, serving as a crucial reminder that you are a person and the sole protagonist of your life span.

This wasn't in the Talmud, but most certainly would have been: Put down your fucking phone. I will, too. We both need to. The first iPhone debuted in 2007; it wasn't that long ago. Although there are fully formed, thinking humans who have lived their entire lives with smartphones, the technology is really recent (though I can no longer remember how to live without one). There isn't a lot of longitudinal research yet to tell us what our phone addictions are doing to us but we know, deep inside, how ubiquitous smartphone use is affecting us. We can feel it. We talk about it with each other. My clients certainly know; they talk about it with me constantly.

The Shabbat of modernity includes no electricity, and this means digital fasts—a twenty-four-hour break from anything with a screen, phone included. Try this, even one time. Turn off your phone from sundown to sundown *just to see what it is like*. I have clients who use various tricks to protect their art from phone addiction: Leave the phone at home/out of the studio, seal the phone in an envelope for the duration of your work time, remove social media and other personally addictive apps when you begin working, or turn it off completely.

Personal Inventory Day

I learned this tool from human rights technologist Sabrina Hersi Issa, who I'd like you to look up right now. (Yes, I realize I am asking you to pick back up your phone, but she's worth it: www.beingbrina.com.) I heard her on the January 5, 2018, episode of my favorite podcast, *Call Your Girlfriend*. On that episode, she talked about creating a "possibility model" for her life using a monthly Personal Inventory Day. She sets aside the day on her birthday each month (in her case, the 16th). Every month, she dedicates this day to her life maintenance. These days are devoted to things like checking her personal finances, making medical appointments, reviewing long-term goals, sending gratitude notes, considering her obligations, and

reflecting on her life. She urges us to remember that “*we* run our lives, we set our priorities, and we get to thrive.” Go to her website and then listen to the episode now; I’ll be here when you get back.

I adopted Sabrina’s brilliant idea the moment I heard her. Because I am self-employed, I was able to immediately block off the 15th (my birthdate) of every month in perpetuity for what I call my Personal Maintenance Day. I keep a small journal for the year dedicated to my Personal Maintenance Days. On the 15th of each month, I focus on things that I tend to put off: bodywork, medical and dental appointments, spiritual work, studying languages, writing letters to friends, and annoying but important tasks like filing insurance claims. I do no paid work on these days; instead, I focus on the other parts of my life and my non-work-related goals.

I am currently closing out year two of using Sabrina’s possibility model. Each month, my Personal Maintenance Day is the time I keep my life moving, my goals focused, my body tended to, and my connection to myself intact. Every birthday, I make a list of goals for the year, things I want to try, with whom and where I want to be, and what is important to me. This methodology has helped me accomplish more of what is important to me. It’s helped me—a self-employed person who can easily slip into relentless working—focus on the totality of my life: body, intellect, relationships, living space, and spiritual interior.

Prioritizing Opportunities

When artists are asked to do a lot of things, it’s very exciting and feels gratifying. They think they cannot and should not ever say no. It’s a blessing to be sought after, to have one’s work in demand. They don’t want to jinx it! But a string of opportunities is an occasion to adopt a priority matrix to help you decide whether you say yes, no, or not yet. You may not have the time and resources to say yes to everything, so how do you decide? I have a short matrix that I ask clients to use for their art opportunities. You can amend as you see fit. An invitation must do at least one (preferably more than one) of the following:

- ♦ it pays (actual money, not just exposure)
- ♦ it boosts your career (not a lateral move)
- ♦ it nourishes you (you love the other people, the place, the cause, etc.)

Transitional Rituals

For artists who are transitioning in and out of expanses of open time—freelancers buying their own time, artists at a lengthy residency, educators with summers off—I find it effective to develop rituals that ease you into the unstructured time. First, I ask artists to take a weekend or a day off from their practice rather than jumping right into it. Instead, I want them to tend to other things—their surroundings, relationships, bodies, errands, laundry, anything that’s been neglected recently—before they dive into work. Even artists at a lengthy retreat can benefit from using the first day to settle in, read, scope out the environs, and meet other people.

After the day off or two, I ask artists to develop a series of warm-up exercises to get them into their creative work. Dancers and musicians often do this without prompting because their training has warm-ups built in. Other artists may not have learned this habit, but it’s impractical to expect your brain and body to turn right on and get cracking. An artist in any discipline can benefit from creating warm-up rituals and practices; warming up doesn’t have to be correlated to your practice at all! Painters might listen to loud music and dance alone before they start working. Writers might draw or do a few writing prompts unrelated to their project. Some artists like to read or look through art books before they get going. A brief silent or guided meditation is very useful; you can even try a book-end meditation—a short meditation at the beginning and end of your working time. The point is to ease your body and your brain into your art rather than asking it to suddenly *be productive* without first warming up.

Help, Simple Help

Sometimes the solution for freeing up time is just good, old-fashioned help. This is actually quite a complicated topic that I will write about at length in the Asking chapter. An artist who doesn’t know where to find time to redirect back to their practice may just need some help: asking a partner to pick up kids from school for a month, hiring a housecleaning service, finding a dog walker, and any number of other favors or purchased services that can provide extra hours in a week.

What we do with our time comprises our days, weeks, and months. What you feed will grow. As you devote more hours to your practice each month, you’ll very likely feel more connected to yourself, more grounded, and greater self-efficacy as an artist. Small pockets of time really add up; don’t scoff at the hour a day, five days a week, that you’ve recovered from social media scrolling. Over a year, that’s 260 extra hours you’ve recommitted to your art.



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CHAPTER TWO

I believe in the dignity of labor, whether with head or hand; that the world owes every man [sic] an opportunity to make a living.

—JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER JR.

All paid jobs absorb and degrade the mind.

—ARISTOTLE

It is well with me only when I have a chisel in my hand.

—MICHELANGELO¹

Adjunct faculty

Architects

Astrologers

Animators

Art handlers

Artist assistants

Baristas

Bartenders

Cater waiters

Chefs

Clothing and textile designers

Community organizers

Composers, commercial and film
Copywriters
Costume designers
Curators
Dance instructors
Gig workers
Graphic designers
Grocery store workers
Hairdressers
High school teachers
Homelessness service providers
Interior designers
Journalists
Massage therapists
Nannies
Nonprofit staff, upper, middle, and entry level
Personal assistants
Photographers
Private tutors
Producers, theater/film/television/commercial/brand experience
Professors, tenure-track and non
Prop masters
Retail workers
Servers
Sex workers

Small business owners and co-owners

Stylists

Tech start-up employees

University and college staff

Videographers

Web designers

Wedding industry professionals

Yoga and Pilates instructors

Youth arts educators

That is a partial list of the many kinds of work my clients do to earn money. There is very little correlation between what the client does for money and the nature and discipline of their creative work. I've had multiple clients working each job listed here. Most artists in my clientele have held more than one of these jobs at the same time. Artists do all kinds of things to get paid; they have very different financial circumstances, families, and practical needs. Some want and need the stability, health insurance, and other benefits of a salaried, full-time job. Some have earning limits or work constrictions due to disability benefits, work visas, and documentation status. Some have kids and want an income that covers a college education so that their children aren't saddled with a debilitating amount of student loan debt. Others need freelance work that makes it possible for them to leave town for months at a time. All these artists routinely question and reevaluate what they want and need in our sessions.

An artist's central question when it comes to employment is *my art + making a living = what the fuck?* This is not a paradox but rather an equation that you may continually rework and re-solve throughout your life. This is OK. It doesn't mean you never "figured it out." Capitalism isn't something to figure out; it is something to navigate and live within, while chipping away at its harmful effects and structures and finding strategies for usurping its rules. I don't believe that making 100% of your income from your art is a barometer of success, unless you explicitly decide you want it to be. I have a few clients who make 100% of their income from their art and,

lo and behold, they are not happier and freer. It turns out happiness and peace of mind are not connected to free time and money; more on that if you return to the Time and Money chapters!

EMPLOYMENT VS WORK

It is helpful to pull apart the concept of *jobs* and *employment* (the work you do for income) from your *work* or your *art career* (your creative practice, paid and unpaid). Putting the burden of income on your art practice will create a pressure and expectation that can lead to resentment and abandonment. Let's get back to basics: You make art because you're an artist; you need this practice in your life to be a healthy, whole person. Even if your art never earns you money, you are an artist and need to continue making your work. Imagine two spaghetti noodles; one is paying employment and one is your art practice. Pull them apart and put them in separate stock-pots of well-salted water, one labeled *money* and one labeled *overall well-being*.

Converting your artwork and artistic vision into a paying practice depends upon a lot of factors: what kind of art you make, relationships, luck, where you live, assertiveness, stick-to-itiveness, access to capital, and what else you do for money. There are strategies, to be sure, to move toward monetizing your practice, but, truthfully, I want you to turn down the pressure valve on your creative practice earning you a living. Your art is already doing a lot for you. Can you consider the radical proposal that even if your work never pays you, it will still be a valuable and integral part of your life, for the rest of your life? What if your art gives you life and your employment pays for that life?

Imagine a continuum; at one end is moneymaking work that has zero connection to your art practice, vision, and creative skill. The other end is money earned from the art you generate that is solely your vision and completely what you want to make, of your own volition. Most artists live somewhere in between those two ends, sliding back and forth throughout their working lives. No spot on this continuum is good or bad. When you find yourself dissatisfied with your location on the continuum, you have choices about how to move yourself along.

THE WORLD OF WORK

I've always been obsessed with work. As a kid, I loved when I had a reason to go to work with one of my parents. My dad, in addition to being in the Army Reserves, worked in car dealerships, and my mom was a secretary in a variety of educational and corporate settings. I wanted to know what, precisely, they did all day. The desks, supply closets, weird co-workers, office bathrooms, and TVs tucked into strange waiting rooms gave me the same stomach flutter I got from designing my own handwritten invoices for toy catalogs, carefully filling out orders for all the stuff I had no money to buy. My Capricorn traits emerged early.

Working, and how we make choices about work, fascinates me. Rather than thinking about sex, crime, or scandal when I people watch, I daydream about what kinds of jobs everyone has. I rumi-nate about strangers' work lives and believe my own imaginings to the point of denial. Living in Los Angeles, one can encounter many famous people. In my neighborhood, I frequently saw a man around and convinced myself that he worked in corporate finance. I completely invented this fact based on nothing. One day, a friend pointed out the man and yelped in my ear, "Holy shit, that's [redacted name of early '90s pop star]! Why didn't you tell me he's in your neighborhood?!" Confused, I responded, "You mean that guy who works in finance?"

We spend most of our lives working, both paid and unpaid. We spend more time with our co-workers than with our friends, families, and communities. Because of that, career counseling is a significant field of study, research, and practice. Career counseling, to some, sounds boring, confusing, or decidedly not fun. When I was studying counseling psychology at the University of Missouri, there was a brilliant feminist psychologist, Dr. Mary Heppner, who researched and taught career counseling. When people invariably asked her about this seemingly square choice in the wide-open field of counseling, she would answer that career counseling was about "giving people back their dreams."

I heard this quote from Dr. Heppner secondhand, and I swooned. What a gift, to help people come home to their dreams! Though we spend so much of our lives immersed in work, our knowledge about it is often limited; what we believe is available to us is narrow, shaped by our family as well as our race, class, gender, ability, and our many intersecting identities. In moments of my life, working some terrible job surrounded by truly miserable human beings disregarding one another's humanity, I would wonder, "If we spend most of our waking life working, why not try and make that a little better?"

Artists in America, especially those underrepresented in the dominant art markets, are inundated with all kinds of messaging about work, labor, and art. They often internalize poisonous myths saturating the culture, such as: If you work a day job, you're a lesser artist; if your art were good enough, you would've made it your full-time job; your creative practice is just a hobby; you should make or will never make money from your art. The reality is, whether your creative work has earned you a dime, it's an essential fact of your existence. And for most of us, earning a living is another essential fact.

America, you may have noticed, is a work-obsessed culture. Though we, on average, do not work the most hours, we're on the higher end, globally. America's dominant culture insists on its bootstrap mythology, that hard work contributes to a meritocracy where everyone is rewarded fairly for their skills and achievements. Work, for many of us, becomes a socially sanctioned addiction. According to a study in *The Nation*, one-third of Americans work forty-five hours or more a week, and 9.7 million Americans work more than sixty. Journalist Bryce Covert explains, "Unlike every other developed country, we don't have a guaranteed right to paid time off for illness, a new child, or holidays and vacation. Even weekends off are a custom, not a rule."²

We know this in our bones, research just underscores what we experience. And much of this research focuses on formal employment rather than gig workers and those who patch together a living. Then there is all the unpaid labor we do: cooking, cleaning, childcare and eldercare, managing and maintaining households—sometimes in sync with partners, if we have them, but often out of balance. Often this falls along gender statistics, but my community is filled with queer people whose lives don't conform to the typical binary formula. (Even there, however, one partner is typically doing more unpaid household labor.)

It's appalling how many of my clients over the years have called themselves lazy or said they hate to work. Artists are often working more hours than non-artists. The majority of you work one or more jobs to earn a living, and then, during the reprieve from the paying jobs, you devote more hours and days to your creative work. This is in addition to raising children, caring for family, cooking, cleaning, volunteerism, and the other forms of labor in your life. Artists know hard work, long hours, and the demands of fitting too much into a day. My clients sometimes hate employment, but they love to work.

SHAPING YOUR CHOICES

Helping clients make decisions about employment means considering them as holistic persons, taking into account all facets of their lives, internally and externally. We talk about how much money they need to earn, how much they want to earn, their skills and interests, logistics such as commuting and family schedules, and what they already know about themselves regarding paid employment and how it intersects with their art practice. Each artist is wired differently. By this I mean employment that suits one person will not suit the next. For example, I have clients who teach art in higher education settings. Working with emerging artists fuels them and they are reenergized within their own practice. For them, it's a stable job with an ideal schedule. I have other clients who absolutely cannot teach art because they find it draining, and they won't make their own work during the academic year.

When it comes to paid work, we all respond differently to various factors. Some of us need meaning in every job, or else we cannot show up for it. Others want their paid work to be relatively mindless; when they leave work for the day, they don't want to think about it. Some people want to work alone while others get energy from co-workers. Many people don't want a boss and opt to be self-employed; still others don't like the pressure of the freelance life, drumming up one's own work and managing one's own schedule. It's important to understand what you are like currently in the world of paid work. To do this, you will need to look at your own working history.

Try this: Make a list of every single job you've ever had, including how much you earned per hour and what you liked and didn't like about each one. Start with the most recent jobs and go back in time all the way to your tween and teen years, everything you can remember. Really excavate. This can be an interesting exercise to do with another person; you can press one another to go deeper in your thinking. The goal is to identify some themes about what you like and don't like in the realm of paid work, to consider your earning history, and to capture a list of skills and assets you possess.

I'll use myself as an example. My first on-the-books employment as a teenager in the mid-'90s was working at a Dairy Queen, making \$4.25 an hour, which was minimum wage. I liked working with other people my age, many of whom I wouldn't have met otherwise. I liked the variety of tasks in a shift. I liked the inside jokes and

team mentality we had during busy shifts; I loved going out for late-night diner coffee with my co-workers after closing. I hated how physically demanding the job was for so little money. I hated the uniforms and the mean, cheap owners.

Jumping to the current day, I now have an arts consulting practice. I love being my own boss and setting my own fees and prices. I love working from home and creating diversified income streams, including consultation, fundraising, writing books, university teaching, and community workshops. I hate not having paid time off, though I create cushions for myself to accommodate this. I dislike all the marketing I have to do for various parts of my practice. A couple of clear themes emerge from considering these two jobs: I love variety on the job and making good money. I love working with people, but I *really* don't want a boss.

Try capturing all the skills used in your current and previous jobs, both the technical/specific and the general. Often, we have skills and qualities that we don't think about because we imagine they are ubiquitous, but they're not. For example, considering my work-history description, I understand that I can be both a leader (I'm a teacher, workshop leader, self-employed) and I can work well with a team (I have fundraising experience; I get along well with co-workers; I enjoy getting stressful tasks done with others). Think about the specific skills you have, such as technology, software, tools, and the like. Think about the less technical skills you have, such as managing other people, being self-directed, efficiency, working within deadlines, ability to conduct research, or proficiency at teaching others. Seeing the totality of the skills that you already possess can generate ideas for ways of earning money. This can also increase the kinds of jobs you will understand you are qualified for.

EMPLOYMENT BOUNDARIES

However you are earning money, examine the boundaries you have with work. We all need boundaries with our jobs, lest they become our central focus in life. Artists need extra boundaries with their paid, non-art employment in order to protect their practice. Thinking about the ways your paid work supports or detracts from your creative practice can help you decide whether you would benefit from changing the ways in which you earn money. For example, I've had clients leave full-time jobs and go freelance (and vice versa) as they determined that the other way of working would better support their creative goals. I've had clients make peace with jobs that the

culture tells them are “beneath them” because these jobs paid good money and asked very little of them outside a shift. I’ve had clients seek out new ways of earning money once they realized they could get higher hourly wages, thus opening up more time for their practice.

Some artists, depending on their personal nature or the nature of their employment, benefit from turning down the level of brilliance they give to their paid job. I am not telling you to stop working or do a bad job, but I am asking you to consider whether you are the kind of person who gives their employer 110%, often sacrificing the other parts of your life. A lot of my clients are socialized this way; they overwork their paid jobs because that’s who they are and what they expect of themselves. They want to give a job their all and not disappoint their bosses, clients, colleagues, or students. To those of you who identify with this, consider giving your paid jobs 91%. Do a B+ job at work. Don’t aim for perfection, which doesn’t exist. It’s likely that your B+ is other people’s A+ with extra credit.

Make the commitment to your paid work rightsized. Your paid employment owes you a paycheck, maybe benefits. You owe your jobs the labor you’ve agreed to provide. As you turn up the volume on your creative practice, you’ll find even more meaning in your art, which will lessen your need to get this from your paid jobs. The more you give time and resources to your art, the more you’ll understand paid employment as something that supports your art and life. We get this backward, thinking that we are on the planet to work and earn money. Let’s flip it—we earn a living to pay for our lives.

ARTISTS WHO DON'T NEED MONEY

I’ve had a number of clients who live off unearned income, most often from family circumstances, which encompasses everything from generations of inherited wealth to life insurance payouts following a tragic death. These clients have taught me a lot about the challenges that exist for artists with personal wealth. Before I worked with these artists, I believed, like so many others, that they had it easier. With enough money and plenty of time, they could really arrange their lives and practices to their desires. I was wrong! These clients had entirely different sets of problems and anxieties to grapple with; they needed as much support in managing money, feelings, and time as every other artist. Now I know the answer for an artist isn’t as simple as, “I had a million dollars and no job . . .”

To begin with, my clients with personal wealth often have this money through complex family relationships or even tragedy. No amount of money wipes away trauma and dysfunction, unfortunately. And some artists who live off unearned family income have financially precarious lives; they have just enough to maintain a simple life without working paid jobs. They obsess over whether they should earn more money and how they would do it; they face the internal challenge of finding paid work when one isn't financially forced to do so.

These artists often feel a lot of guilt, shame, and secrecy about their access to money. They believe they must hide their financial reality for a number of reasons. They fear judgment in their community, worry people will ask them for money, or wonder how this information would impact their relationships. Guilt, shame, and secrecy erode a person's self-esteem, no matter how much money someone has. This will certainly impact one's art practice.

As discussed in [chapter 1](#), Time, I see open expanses of time as the enemy of 99% of the artists I meet. So, my clients who do not have to earn a living can suffer from the anxiety paralysis that occurs when one doesn't have a schedule they are expected to keep. My clients with unearned income who navigate this successfully do so by treating their studio practice as their full-time job. They keep rigid schedules for their workweek, which helps them then enjoy their time off from work. Some get non-art jobs in order to maintain a scheduled week.

For artists who have complicated feelings about the unearned income in their lives, I first work to help them unearth the guilt, shame, and secrecy that may be attached to it. We don't get to choose our parents or grandparents; we have no choice in the economic circumstances we are born into. This is true no matter what end of the economic spectrum you find your family in. These artists find relief in being open about their financial circumstances and talking to other artists who have similar feelings about comparable backgrounds. They also find respite in using their economic privilege in service of their values: contributing to a vibrant arts community, treating their art practice as their job, financially contributing to an arts economy in their towns, giving their time and other resources to social justice causes, and buying art from emerging and early-career artists.

By changing the artist's relationship to the money in their life, they can feel more connected to others, regardless of class background. They can see the money as a blessing, as a tool to create the life they want and to contribute to building the world

they want to live in. They can use money in service of building equitable, supportive creative communities.

WORKING YOUR ART

Whether you make no money or some money from your art and/or creative skills, you can take steps toward increasing this area of earning. Some art can be highly saleable (paintings, illustration, music composition) while other work can be very difficult to sell (video art, dance, live performance). The nature of what you make impacts the challenges you will face in monetizing it. This is OK! Do not abandon ship! Again, your artwork doesn't *have* to earn you money for it to be profoundly valuable in your life.

In determining how to monetize your art practice, there are two main categories to examine: There is art you create, and then there are the gifts and skills you use to create art. Both can be potential sources of earning, but the latter deserve some attention. In thinking about the skills and talents your artwork requires, teaching (workshops, community classes, youth, higher education) can be a natural way to monetize what you know. There are also many other ways to make a living from your creative gifts and skills.

Los Angeles artist and composer Carolyn Pennypacker Riggs has long made original music for and toured with her bands. She uses the skills and gifts necessary to write and perform music in scoring and composing music for commercials, films, podcasts, and other artists' projects. This work is her own creation, but it's not her creative practice; she's using the skills and gifts she has as a composer and musician to earn money beyond what her bands and albums generate.

All my photography clients know this strategy. They have their photo art practice, which they try to monetize through sales and exhibition, but they also work as wedding photographers, take author photos, and do other commercial photography work. My writer clients (poetry, fiction, journalism, creative nonfiction) often use their skills to earn money as copywriters, editors, grantwriters, and artwriters. Some of the video artists and filmmakers I've worked with earn a living as videographers and editors in the arts, nonprofit, and commercial sectors.

MONEYMAKING STRATEGIES

What strategies can you use to make money from your actual art? Again, that is highly dependent on what kind of art you make. A core strategy is marketing your work. Start with looking to people who make work similar to yours in discipline, if not content. Look to artists who are further in their career than you but whose work you believe would be contextualized together in an exhibition, festival, or series: your aspirational (but realistic) peers. Look for artists who are both your peers and your heroes—your *peeroes*. Ask them how they are making money from their art. If you don't know them well, do some reconnaissance to find out this information. Selling work to collectors? Receiving commissions to create new work from galleries, museums, or arts organizations? Creating affordable editions, merchandise, and collectible objects or work that can be bought at a lower price point than most art? Selling work over social media and websites? Performing or presenting their work for paying audiences? How, specifically, is money changing hands? This is what you need to know so that you can try incorporating this into your creative life.

1. The best thing I have read about work and labor was “Lines of Work” in *Lapham’s Quarterly* IV, no. 2 (Spring 2011). I sourced these contradicting labor quotes from this volume.

2. Bryce Covert, “Americans Work Too Much Already,” *The Nation*, September 28, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/americans-work-too-much-already>.



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CHAPTER THREE

To the artist, all problems of art appear uniquely personal. Well, that's understandable enough, given that not many other activities routinely call one's basic self-worth into question.

—DAVID BAYLES AND TED ORLAND, *ART & FEAR*

Ramziya,³ an Arab American visual artist with an MFA from a prestigious art program, was in a fetal position on my office couch, gripping a pillow to her chest. She pleaded again, begging me not to make her do what I was asking. I took a breath and softened my face. I quietly encouraged her, hands resting on my lap, watching as she balled up into a small, anxious animal, her cell phone hidden under a thick pool of long, black hair.

I reminded Ramziya that the task would take only fifteen seconds and would almost certainly have a positive outcome. Smiling, I insisted that I would give her all the time she needed. Ramziya made guttural moaning sounds, picking up her cell phone and then hiding it again. She insisted that this task would kill her. Really it would. It was impossible. Couldn't she do it later, maybe the next day? No, I told her gently and quietly. We would finish this important task during our session so we could move on to the next order of business.

So what terrible act was I asking my long-suffering client to perform? Ramziya and I had agreed that she would apply for an upcoming grant, unrestricted funding that she sorely needed and intensely wanted. She has a very impressive exhibition history. Frequently sought after by thoughtful, experienced curators in Los Angeles and New York, Ramziya's works have created a large, passionate fan base, comprising many other acclaimed artists. I knew she was competitive for this grant; it would be precisely the money and confidence boost she needed to complete the large-scale work that was already underway. But the deadline loomed just a few weeks away and we needed something crucial for the application: a letter of recommendation.

Ramziya had sighed heavily when I brought up the letter earlier in the session, asking her to suggest some people who know her work well and might be willing to write it. At the top of the list was Stella, a successful curator who has an enviable career and a strong reputation as a forward-thinking champion of under-recognized artists. Stella knew Ramziya's work intimately and could speak to her exhibition history and the intricacies of her art with intellect and emotion. Stella was on medical leave; she would have a major surgery in the coming days, making this a difficult time for a professional request. But we had an ace in the hole: Stella happened to be Ramziya's best friend.

I felt momentarily baffled by Ramziya's emotional resistance and physicalized reaction to asking her best friend for a letter of recommendation. We could simply write the first draft, making the request even easier on Stella. I am human, however, and, watching Ramziya squirm in anguish for fifteen minutes, I wondered, *Am I a monster?* The artist in front of me was in real pain. I thought carefully about how much to push and when to back off. I wouldn't have been surprised if Ramziya had broken out in hives in that moment, so intense was her anxiety.

My professional instinct was to let her feel the fear and express every reason out loud as to why she did not want to ask her best friend to compose and sign a letter of recommendation. She had many reasons, but I knew none of them was based in reality. It was just fear whispering to her that it was unacceptable to ask someone for something she needed. It would be "bothering" them, and this was something Ramziya worked hard to avoid.

In session with clients, I have patience and will, in equal match. I decided to lovingly wait until she sent the text to Stella. Finally, with only minutes left in our hour, Ramziya hit send while squeezing her eyes shut, squealing. Within seconds, Stella responded, "Of course!"

Ramziya is not alone in her powerful, deep-seated resistance to asking for help, support, and resources. Every artist I have ever worked with is on a continuum of resistance to any kind of help seeking. This resistance, driven by all kinds of fear, manifests in many ways and has a variety of negative consequences on artists' lives. After years of close, emotional work with artists, I am well acquainted with the kinds of help and support artists are reluctant to ask for—as well as the kinds they desperately need.

Truthfully, it's hard for most of us to ask for things: money, information, introductions, professional support, contacts, even help moving a couch. Most people don't like to ask for anything. Often, it's because we were taught that it's wrong to do so. Through a mix of gender and cultural socialization, combined with unwieldy American capitalism, people internalize all kinds of beliefs about what it means to ask for help of any kind. Yet learning how to ask has the power to transform an artist's practice, career, and life.

WHY YOU'RE NOT ASKING

Many artists (especially, but not only, those socialized as female at any point in their lives) tell me they are fearful that if they ask for anything—studio visits, mentorship, interviews, introductions, opportunities, money, editing, equipment—they will seem desperate, and various art worlds will neglect and punish them. This is capitalistic, patriarchal bullshit and the consequence of systemic garbage that convinces entire sectors of people that there aren't enough resources to go around and therefore you must compete with and destroy one another for them. For 100% of my clients, the more they ask means the more they will get. If another artist says you seem desperate because you want something and ask for help with getting it, please don't internalize that person's fear of the world.

There are hundreds of reasons artists won't ask for something, including socialization, low self-esteem, a mentality that having few resources is morally superior, and lack of knowledge of where to begin. I find that most reasons can be reduced to a simple, baseline cause: fear. Here's what I've heard from artists regarding their resistance to asking for help:

- ✦ **Everyone else is succeeding without help.**
- ✦ **Success won't count if I don't do it completely on my own.**
- ✦ **I won't appear professional.**
- ✦ **I'm afraid of being told no.**
- ✦ **If I'm given something, what if I can't return the favor?**
- ✦ **What if I get what I need and then I don't finish my project or it's not good enough?**

- ✦ I'll just be bothering or annoying someone.
- ✦ I might run out of favors, so I should save my requests and favors, using them strategically.
- ✦ I don't want to take up space and resources that someone probably needs more than I do.
- ✦ Once I get one no, then I figure the rest will be nos too, so why bother asking anyone else.
- ✦ I don't know where to start.
- ✦ I don't want people to think I'm using them.
- ✦ People will think that I don't know what I'm doing.
- ✦ What if I seem desperate (or weak or needy)?!
- ✦ I'm nobody. Why would they help me?

First, consider how this list applies in your life. Does anything here resonate with you? Think for a moment: What kinds of help do you need or long for? Why don't you ask for it? Are there specific kinds of help that seem unavailable for you but that you think other people can have?

Let's unpack some of these common hesitations.

I Don't Want to Seem Pushy

Please understand that you are not bothering someone by merely asking for something. If that person seems bothered, consider that it's more a reflection of them, or their mood that day, than you. Do not take it personally. It's OK for you to take up space. It's OK for you to ask for things. Asking friends or strangers for any kind of support for your creative projects doesn't make you desperate or needy or aggressive or whatever other word marginalized artists internalize when they dare to be in the world. There are many steps between asking for something and being pushy; don't conflate the two. A nice reflection to help you here: When you wonder whether your request is pushy, think about whether you'd be excited for an artist friend you admire to ask for the same thing. Is it OK for them but not for you? Time to overrule your internal supervisor and ask anyway.

I Can't Return the Favor

You don't have to be able to replicate every favor someone does for you. The people in your community have different resources, skills, and access; together, you're probably unstoppable. Make a personal inventory of what kind of help you *can* provide: time, babysitting, editing, extra funds, studio space, help reading forms, art world relationships, deadline accountability, making a budget, setting up equipment, emotional support, working the door at an event, practice studio visits, marketing, and much more. Whatever your unique brand of help, you can be sure that it's very much needed, wanted, and valuable to others. Think about how you could repay the kindness in your own way, whether to the giver or by paying it forward to someone else.

I Don't Want to Overdo It

Worried you're going to over-ask, run out of favors, dry the well? Many people incorrectly believe there is only so much goodwill available to them. Like, we each get twelve favors per year. Really, when you are part of a loving, supportive community that wants one another to succeed, the goodwill is bottomless! You have a major hand in cultivating and sustaining that community (more on that in [chapter 7](#), Other People). In a community, you're able to spread requests out across people as needed. The same person will not be able to accommodate your needs every time, just like you sometimes have to say no to someone you care about. That's why communities comprise more than two people.

It's useful to spread out your requests for help and resources across your support system; this makes it more likely that somebody will be able and willing to give you what you need. It's also important to consider what you're asking for and whether you're approaching the most appropriate person. There is a saying: Don't go to the hardware store for milk. Essentially, don't ask for help from someone who you know is unwilling or unable to give it. Choose someone else.

One more strategy for making it easier for friends to say yes to your request: Ask for something clear and achievable. Instead of "Hello, I'm in crisis. Can you please fix me?" try "Hello, I need emotional support. Can you listen to me talk and cry for a while?" Or, rather than "Can you help me get performance opportunities?" try a

clearer “Can you introduce me to these three people?” Requesting help that is clear, achievable, quantifiable, and well matched to the person you are asking can increase the likelihood you’ll get a “Yes!”

Someone Else Deserves This More Than Me

What about the pesky belief that you’ll take a resource that someone else deserves or needs more? Oh, were it true that we lived in a meritocracy! How wonderful if people who needed more help actually received it. What a beautiful idea that artwork more deserving of resources got everything it required. There is no correlation between visionary art and external success. Incredible works exist in obscurity while dumb shit gets attention and money all the time. Sometimes there is justice and pioneering artists get money, fame, power, or whatever else they are looking for. Still, by removing yourself from a recipient pool, by taking yourself out of the running, by *not* asking for what you need or want, you are *not* making more space for another person who needs something more.

Why? Because you do not have any control over the distribution of these resources. I’ve had clients tell me they didn’t want to apply for something because they thought someone else deserved it more than them. My uniform response: You’re going to be really angry if you don’t go after this and then some asshole gets it instead. How can you be so sure *you* don’t deserve it anyway? Don’t make yourself small. Grow big and confident, get good things for yourself, and then shine lights on other artists, spread resources, and redistribute wealth!

What If It’s a Yes!?

You know what can be scarier than being told no? Being told yes! Artists tell me that if they get the grant, raise the funds, get a whole crew of people to help them on the project, then it all becomes *too real*. They have to show up and actually make the work, which sets off an entirely new set of fears about the work being good enough, disappointing people, or not living up to the expectations they link to the help they’re getting. Those fears are great to bring to your artist community, asking for emotional support and a reality check about your art. Your artist friends can remind you that they, too, worry that their work isn’t good enough.

WHY IT’S OK TO ASK

Guess what? It's false that other artists are doing it all alone. Or anything alone. We are social, relational creatures, and the mythic lone artists are pretty much that—myth. As for the rare lone creative genius that's held up as some sort of aspiration—the one making their art outside of arts institutions, community, and support structures—trust me when I tell you that you don't want their life. Outsider artist Henry Darger comes to mind. I love his art intensely, but I wouldn't wish the life he lived on anyone.

A healthy creative ecosystem is one where artists of every background, discipline, and circumstance have access to information, resources, and infrastructure that enable them to maintain and grow their practice throughout their lifetimes. The foundation of this ecosystem is a solid and open artist community. Asking for, receiving, and providing others with help isn't just the mark of a healthy ecosystem member, it's the mark of a healthy human. Other people, including artists you know, are asking for and receiving all kinds of help. Why shouldn't you? Whatever the reason your mind is generating right now as to why you alone can't receive help, I guarantee you that it's not true. You, whoever you are, whatever your circumstances, can ask for, receive, and provide other artists with help.

The artists you envy and admire, who are further in their career and seem to get a lot of stuff that you also want, are asking for things, all over the place. I promise. If one tells you they get no help or support and they are 100% self-made, they are lying. Success of all kinds happens in art communities because of opportunities provided and help given. Simply making great work does not yield success. Often, help is hidden or just out of sight. Artists may have support structures in place—such as help from family, spouses, assistants, or unearned wealth—that they don't disclose and that is hidden from view.

For a while I had a rash of clients who would compare their circumstances living and working (and struggling) in major US cities to their peers who seemed to be able to buy houses without working full-time jobs. I finally realized what I needed to do: Break the myth of family financial support! Your friend, who is younger than you and doesn't work a regular job, is never stressed out about money, and just bought a house in an expensive city? No, they didn't figure out something that is beyond you. They aren't better at being adults. They have financial help! There is unearned money inherited, given, or lent to them somewhere along the way. Some artists have

families who can and will help them financially and others don't, for a lot of structural, cultural, and systemic reasons having to do with race and class history in the United States.

Busting this myth is liberating for many artists who find they suddenly feel less overwhelmed and left out when they learn that their peers have different levels of access to inherited wealth, credit, and prosperous communities. (Though they usually feel angry.) There is nothing level about the financial playing field in capitalism! When an artist comes to accept that their student loan debt and paycheck-to-paycheck life isn't a sign that they did something wrong, they can move their internalized feelings of shame to external scrutiny of the systems in which we live. This is empowering—enraging but empowering. When an artist lets go of shame about their specific financial circumstances, this can open up a willingness to ask for help, advocate for their own work, and find solutions in both their personal financial wellness and the financial health of their immediate community.

Finally, it comes down to probability! The more you ask for, the more you will get. Religious organizations are the top not-for-profit recipients for donations in the United States. Why? Because they ask everybody in their community for money and they ask repeatedly, sometimes every week. If you ask one hundred people for money toward your project, somebody, probably several somebodies, will give it to you.

THE DAY OF REJECTION

Getting told no doesn't feel great. When you ask for something and you're either ignored or rejected, it sucks. I tell my clients when they get a no that particularly stings—a coveted residency, a lengthy grant application, requesting a studio visit with a powerful curator—they should make space for feeling terrible for half a day. One day tops. The day of the rejection, you are free to feel awful, have a pity party alone or with friends, and wonder if it's all been for naught. Really go for it! Then, the next day, you have to commit to taking three new actions toward the goal you have for your art.

Sometimes I find that artists will get stuck on a perceived no when in fact they just haven't gotten a response yet. A client may send someone an email, and two weeks later, when they haven't gotten a response, they morosely tell me it was a rejection. I

remind them they just haven't gotten an answer yet and that communication may not happen on their desired time line. The answer isn't necessarily no; they don't know the answer!

When you ask for something, however formal or informal the request, your control ends with the asking. You are powerless over what happens next. Will you get the grant you've just applied for? Will your friend agree to watch your kid on Friday so you can attend a gallery opening? Will that potential collaborator respond to your email? You are powerless over the outcome, but you totally have power and influence over the asking, following up, and reciprocating where relevant. Once you've finished your part, you have to turn the results over to the universe (or whatever thing that's bigger than you that you emotionally and spiritually identify with).

Learning to get more comfortable with "no" will dramatically change your experience. You will be rejected from opportunities to which you apply; it's an inevitable outcome for every artist who tries for things. Many artists make it a goal to accrue rejections because along the way they will likely get some positive responses. I know an artist who made a goal for herself to reach twenty rejections. That means she had to apply to and go after a lot of opportunities. What happened along the way, of course, was that in addition to many rejections, she got some of what she asked for: funding, exhibitions, and residencies. Consider that a challenge: Create a goal of getting twenty rejections in the next twelve months. This way, you won't get so hung up on each one. Just keep moving. See what happens.

Sometimes you will be the person who has to say no to a request. Seek opportunities to be on panels, juries, and selection committees. You'll learn a great deal about what makes a strong application and you'll see how hard it is for gatekeepers to make these decisions. Being on the other side helps you depersonalize your own rejection experiences.

HOW TO ASK

Great, you're considering how to ask for what you want and need. But where to start? I ask my clients to start most tasks with the lowest-hanging fruit: What and who do they already have access to? First you will create an inventory listing who you

know, what you're making, and what resources you want. Let's call this your ASKING list. Organizing the information makes it more manageable, and when you visually arrange the information, patterns form and it becomes clear where to begin.

Personal assets list: Create a list (ideally in a spreadsheet) of everyone you have personal relationships with. Begin with people in your creative discipline, then list people in the broader creative world, and then people who don't intersect directly with art communities. Next to each name and contact information, list the kinds of help you imagine this person could provide, everything from money to information to introductions to technical knowledge to editing a draft and reviewing a work sample. Just start with what you know or believe; you'll add to and refine each person's entry as you learn more about what they can and can't offer. Finally, at the top of the list, include yourself: Write a list of everything *you* have to offer others in your community. List what you can do right now.

Opportunities list: In a new tab in the same spreadsheet, develop a chronological list of opportunities you want to apply for, such as performances, festivals, exhibitions, retreats, artist-in-residencies, conference appearances, grants, awards, and fellowships. As you consider each opportunity, take the time to read through the guidelines and figure out what is required to apply. You're looking for eligibility criteria first to determine whether you are currently, absolutely eligible. Then, you're reading to comprehend what each application comprises, precisely. Which documents, information, and work samples will you need?

Now, return to your spreadsheet. Enter the deadline, a website that leads to complete details about the opportunity, the name of the opportunity, and brief notes that are relevant, such as "need a letter of recommendation," or "talk to that friend who got this last year."

If you have no idea what opportunities may be available to you, I have a helpful trick: Make a short list of artists in your discipline whose careers you admire. Start with artists who live in your city or general region, and then expand to those who live in other parts of the country and world. Think of artists who are in a similar career stage as you, as well as those who are much further in their careers; include artists who are emerging, mid-career, and professional creatives. Then, one by one, scour

their websites to read their bios and CVs. You will find names of opportunities to research. You will begin to notice the same grants, residencies, museums, film festivals, presenters, magazines, conferences, and so on; look into these first.

Your list doesn't need to be epic; in fact, I recommend applying to the number of opportunities that is manageable for you. For some, that will be two applications a year; for others, it will be two a month. I want you to both push yourself and be realistic about how much time you can commit to application processes. Every application will vary and require different amounts of time. As you increase the number of applications you put into the world, however, you'll find the process gets faster because you'll begin accruing materials that you can simply copy, paste, and edit. And the more you put out, the more you'll get back.

Projects list: Finally, in a third tab, create a list describing your current projects in every stage. Include projects that are done but haven't really had much exposure, works nearly finished, things you've just started, and work that is swimming around in your mind, asking to be developed. Important: You are not committing to a project just because you add it to the list. Some projects will change drastically, others you will abandon or postpone, and a few you will commit to wholeheartedly. You will update these lists as often as necessary. The projects list doesn't dictate what you're working on; instead, it is a snapshot of your current practice and will be updated as you create your work and change as an artist.

Next to each project, list what kinds of help each work will need. Some projects will be too early in their development for you to know; what they need is simply your time and attention. (Do you need help freeing up time for the project or someone to help you be accountable to it?) Projects that are further along will have clearer needs—everything from money, to an early reader, to recording software, to a referral for good, affordable framing. Capture it all.

Now that you have this inventory spreadsheet, your next step is to identify a need for your work and then to ask for direct support from your community as well as an outside resource from the broader world. Are you stuck in a phase of the work? That generally means you need some outside help. Simply talking about the project and your stuck-ness with a trusted artist friend can be the solution. Are you ready to present an in-progress or final iteration of something? Consider applying to have the work read, performed, screened, or exhibited.

A note to type A, bullet journal—loving readers: This inventory is a tool for supporting yourself! It's not a creative project itself. It will not be perfect; don't obsess over it. Update it as you see fit, but keep it brief.

A few tips for getting going:

Find help asking for more help: Because for most of us it's hard to ask for things, you will definitely find artists in your community who are also having trouble asking for help and applying for things. Grab a partner or form a small group of artists who want to help one another commit to amplifying their works and growing their practice by asking for and receiving resources. Seriously, your partner or group can encourage you to send emails you're avoiding. You can support them in making a deadline and celebrating when it's been met. This is incredibly effective: Your supporters help you go after what you want!

Be in service to your work: When the asking gets tough, try to think of it as asking for help on behalf of the work itself, rather than for yourself. The work will go on to have its own life. It's bigger than you. It will impact people who will have transformative moments with it, all because you created it and let it be in the world. Reframing the ask for help can make it easier. Think of how to be of service to your work so that it can be of service to others.

Don't say no to yourself: Let the person you're asking respond to you. Don't say no to yourself on their behalf. When you talk yourself out of asking someone for something, you're doing just that. Stop talking yourself out of asking.

ASKING WILL TRANSFORM YOU

Each time a client reports back to me that they got something from the outside world—asked for and received help, applied to and got an opportunity—I feel like we both won the lottery. It's a profound change to become willing to ask for things. I'm similarly proud when my clients detach and move on when they're rejected. The transformation is in the willingness to invite the outside world in, to take one's work seriously enough to ask for help, and to believe the work is worth it.

As you begin to ask for help, you will build trust in other people and in yourself. It will become easier to move on when you are turned down. You will happily provide help to those around you, because reciprocity is the foundation supporting your community. You will see the interconnectedness of your creative community and the larger art worlds. Most important, you will come to appreciate that you play a singular, crucial role in it all; today, exactly as you are, you have something to contribute, and you deserve the love and help of others.

3. All client names and identifying details have been changed.



E



CHAPTER FOUR

I don't like money, actually, but it quiets my nerves.

—JOE LOUIS

Artists get angry with me when we talk about money. This happens even when they hire me to talk specifically about money. But they don't just get mad. They also weep, hyperventilate, laugh in overwhelm, and procrastinate on all finance-related homework. I don't take it personally because I understand that money is deeply emotional. Plus, I've had the same reactions with my own finances! Money is deep and confusing for most of us. We can feel embarrassment about what we don't know or understand. Simply mentioning money can provoke fear, guilt, or shame, which in turn produces avoidant behavior, reaching for numbing substances or actions, or cycles of emotional crises.

Right off the bat, before we dive in, I want to recognize that even starting this chapter may cause you some discomfort, fear, or anxiety. I want to frame this chapter with a few acknowledgments:

- ♦ most people find money stressful and you're not alone;
- ♦ gender and racial pay gaps exist in every sector, including the arts;
- ♦ financial literacy and behavioral change happen in small, manageable increments, taken one little step at a time; and
- ♦ wealth accumulation is tied to large and historic systemic injustices; we are powerless over the families we are born into.

Many of us do not learn about personal finance growing up in our families of origin, our schools, and our communities. Maybe we internalized the belief that we were bad at math or suck with money, so we gave up on even trying. Perhaps the adults surrounding us had harmful or chaotic financial behavior. Some of us had adults in our lives who had excellent financial knowledge to share but their role in our lives or how they presented the information turned us off; we couldn't hear it from them. Many of us need to learn, unlearn, or relearn financial literacy as adults, so we must

find the right teachers. Some of us avoided money as adults because it represented care we wanted and didn't receive as children; we are still hoping someone will rescue us, so we underestimate our own financial power and promise. Money is deeply emotional.

Throughout the year, I teach a two-part, six-hour workshop that I developed for artists and arts workers called Getting Real with Money. My process of teaching personal finance is grounded in my counseling training, particularly elements of cognitive behavioral therapy and family systems therapy mixed with a feminist class analysis about how capitalism works in individual and systemic ways in artists' lives. Cognitive behavioral therapy is a therapeutic form that connects thoughts and feelings to their motivations and behaviors as a means of reducing harmful thinking and behaving. Family systems therapy looks at how individuals are understood within family relationships and how this continues to impact their lives well after they leave their family of origin.

I believe that to get really honest about money, one must first engage the emotional (the feelings) and cognitive (the thoughts) terrain that gets activated when one thinks or talks about money. It isn't useful to teach someone financial literacy if they are silently having an anxiety attack, unable to absorb the content. I think it's also unkind to do so. So I first work with artists to become aware of their emotional, cognitive, and physical responses to money and provide tools to identify and navigate these responses. After artists gain this awareness and the tools to navigate their responses, I teach them financial literacy basics, introduce them to diverse voices from the financial advice world, and help them identify achievable goals and methods they can use to reach them.

I begin the workshop with a guided embodiment activity, a meditation in which I ask everyone to conjure up a future iteration of themselves. I ask them to invite the future self into the room, notice what age they are, what they are wearing, if they are carrying anything. We imagine our older, future selves putting a warm, comforting hand on our shoulders; we sit silently, breathing and feeling the weight of this hand. I do this so that the participants can cultivate a sense of doing this hard work for both their present and their future selves. This can serve as an important visualization when one gets overwhelmed with feelings as they think about money. There is a future you that is so grateful for the work of current you. Try inviting a future you into the room as you read this chapter.

Next, it's effective to take an honest inventory of your relationship to money through the lens of your family of origin. We inherit beliefs about money from our families even if we reject their financial values. The adults who raise us are the first people to tell us through words, silence, and behavior what money is all about.

Let's begin with some questions. Respond to these in writing, handwritten if possible. After each set of questions, pause to notice how you're feeling, what you're thinking, and any sensations you observe in your body. Write these down, too. As you link feelings and physical sensations to memories and thoughts, you'll gain important knowledge about how you respond to money.

- 1.** Describe your family of origin through the lenses of class and money. What did you observe as a child? What memories stand out to you? Who controlled money and through what means? Did you have any money you had control over? Was money talked about openly? Hidden? What do you think about this now?
- 2.** When/if you left your home as a teen or young adult, what kinds of things did you do for money? What were your early jobs and how much money did you earn? What early financial experiences jump out at you?
- 3.** What are some financial secrets inside of you? What do you feel shame about financially?
- 4.** Describe what financial health would look like for you or your household.
- 5.** What are a few financial behaviors you have that you are pleased with? What are a few you want to change?
- 6.** Examine your thoughts and your body. What are you thinking and how are you feeling? What are the sensations in your body? What do you feel like doing in this moment?

Now take one financial secret or source of shame and write it on a small scrap of paper. Then, burn that piece of paper. You can create a ritual meaningful to you around burning this paper if you like. This one is released, so when this particular

shame comes up again (and it will), you will remember that you've already released this shame through ritual burning and it no longer holds power over you.

CONSIDERATIONS ON CAPITALISM

In the United States, we are going to live in capitalism throughout our lifetimes. I used to reject this notion because capitalism causes harm and exploitation, and, therefore, I naively assumed it would end. The wild greed and inequity is unacceptable and, therefore, it must go. Many artists share this sentiment and creative people are often at the forefront of leading critique and economic justice work. However, whether or not we want capitalism, it is the system we live within. We must work to change and improve our economic systems, *while we are living within them*. I don't know viable, sustainable ways for artists to live outside of capitalism in the United States. I don't think it's possible to be untouched by the world of money. I ask you to accept that this is the economic system you live within. Accepting doesn't mean condoning or embracing; it means seeing reality and acknowledging that this is what is happening.

Many of us who have deep misgivings about capitalism also love money or at least want more of it, and this can feel incongruent. It helps to understand money as a resource, an energy. It does not have to be intrinsically good or bad. We project meaning on it. It's fundamentally linked to historic and complex economic injustice, and it can also liberate people's choices and provide a lot of good. We, the individual users of money, can make our own meaning of money and decide how we want to use it.

Some of us get it backward. We believe that we have a great deal of power over global capitalism and its dismantling, but we may feel powerless over earning and spending in our own lives. I experienced this, particularly in my earlier adulthood. I could honestly imagine a time that I and a group of co-conspirators would somehow stop or radically change economic injustice, but I felt bewildered about how to make more money, spend less money, and increase my financial literacy. It's not hard to piece together why this happens to some of us. Larger, more distant change that is aligned with our ideals feels easier to focus on than the emotionally puzzling elements of our daily lives.

We each have a one-person-size role to play in making national and even global systemic change. It's like our one vote in a national election; it's small and one single vote does not affect an outcome, but it's *your* single vote and the only one you've got. You, in concert with the millions like you, can and do affect an outcome. With chipping away at or overhauling capitalism, you have your one lifetime of work. It's modest, but it's yours and you must use it.

On the flip side, you have *complete* influence over your own economic reality. Notice I write *influence* rather than *control*. Much of our financial beginnings are outside of our control, inextricably linked to our families of origin, race, gender, immigration status, and other factors that are established years, even generations before we are born. How we are set up for financial literacy and mobility as adults is often a simple accident of birth. But your adult life is the place where you have authority and complete influence over your finances. You have choices regarding how you spend money, earn money, and behave with money.

PUNK DAMAGE

There are many kinds of money damage that are culturally linked and rooted in our families, religions, or communities of origin. One kind of money damage that frequently appears in my consulting practice is referred to as “punk damage,” which is a type of demonization of money and the people who seek it. According to the *Lesbian Lexicon*, Punk Damage⁴ (noun) *is the sordid underbelly of self-limitation that comes directly from having come of age in a punk scene. Often marked by an extreme distaste for the making and/or spending of even small amounts of money.*

Not all artists come from punk culture, which can read as a white person's context though people of color have always been part of and intrinsically linked to punk. Punk damage is fueled and enforced by one's community of people who believe money is bad, immoral, corrupt, or related only to a normative, dominant culture. Punk damage can manifest in under-earning, refusing to buy goods and services, seeking out free things even if one doesn't want them, and a denial of how money is crucial to living and to planning for one's future. Frequently, my clients who have punk damage can point to loud voices from their past who were the harshest enforcers of not earning or seeking money; of course, the irony is that these individuals actually often had a financial safety net in their families of origin.

Graphic memoirist Nicole J. Georges describes her punk damage as “a little bit martyr, a little bit community, a little bit under-earner, and very anti-capitalist.” She explains that punk damage manifested in her life as under-earning and accepting less money for her work than she could and should have. She describes her punk damage as cutting corners in unnecessary ways but for righteous reasons. Punk damage impacted her art career significantly. For a period, she stopped taking commissions for custom pet portraits (an essential part of her income) because not everybody in her community could afford to buy one. She couldn’t square up charging a fair price for her skill and time with the reality that not everyone could have one. Georges continues to have occasional trouble buying needed or wanted items new.

On top of cultural and familial meaning, artists have an additional layer of bullshit surrounding money and earning because your job as an artist may not compensate you much, possibly not at all. You may work many other jobs to support yourself and your family while striving to protect your creative practice. Being an artist, as opposed to many other sectors, often has no clear professional trajectory, pay scale, or advancement pathway. Very few artists (in any discipline) make their entire income from their artwork, yet that is held as the standard of economic and professional success for artists. Artists tell me that they feel ashamed or secretive about the non-art ways in which they earn money, as though they aren’t successful if they don’t make a living solely from their practice. Ugh, the bullshit!

YOUR LIFE AS A FINANCIAL BEING

Artists, you’re probably going to live longer than you think you will. I hope we *all* do! It’s difficult to conceptualize ourselves in the elder years. So often, when a client hits a milestone birthday, they tell me they never thought they’d live this long. In your elder years, you will need to be able to care for yourself in many ways, including financially. Rather than responding to this with fear or overwhelm, I want you to consider how you can start now, in some small way, to be of service to elder you, whether that is a few years or many decades away.

If you share money with your significant other—combined finances, shared expenses, living together and splitting core costs, and so on—you could benefit from couple’s counseling to examine your financial values, habits, and goals. You know that situation in which two people get together and they make the same amount of

money and have exactly the same financial habits and values? Me neither, because it doesn't exist! In a couple, there are two people making slightly or significantly different incomes, with two different sets of money habits, disparate financial literacy, separate family financial histories, and differing financial values. That's not a bad thing. It's reality, and it is completely normal and healthy that these two individuals will need to learn to work together, financially.

Money is among the main reasons couples seek counseling. If you and your partner struggle with, fight over, or avoid talking about money together, you're not alone. You don't need to be in crisis to seek out couples counseling. In fact, a couple can cover a lot of territory when not in crisis. Creating and implementing family financial goals is an important project for every couple. Both people should participate in the financial matters of the household, even if one partner is reluctant and the other is willing. Like other realms of the relationship, both people need to be partners to each other in financial matters.

Money is emotional, but making financial changes is all about behavior. It's about creating new habits, short-term and long-term goals, and practical, manageable steps to move in the direction of your objectives. For example, artists tell me a magic number, an amount of cash that could solve their problems, change their lives, and free them of their worries. Sometimes it's just \$10,000, but it can creep up higher. But I've observed, in watching financial behavior, that an increase in cash—income increase, inheritances, grants, insurance payouts—makes a bigger and longer lasting difference if the individual also makes behavior changes through realistic, incremental financial goals. I've seen multiple artists get their magic \$10,000, and, within six months, they are exactly where they began with the same financial problems.

We don't really know the truth about other people's financial reality. This is important to remember when we make quick judgments about how much we think a person has or doesn't have, and what their family's financial situation may be. In my work, I actually *do* learn the truth about many people's financial realities, and frequently my snap judgments were all wrong. When we find ourselves focusing on what we think other people have or do not have, it's time to put the focus back on ourselves and our financial habits and goals.

There are circumstances, however, in which financial transparency is vital. Gender and racial wage gaps, for example, are situations in which sharing your salary, wages, and pricing structures will help you and your friends, colleagues, and

communities get transparent information about money. The arts, in particular, have little financial transparency, and when artists hoard financial information, this can contribute to the gender and racial wage gaps that very much exist in every discipline.

DON'T DO IT ALONE

A popular refrain in my professional life is this: Don't do it alone. This is true for most things, and since artists often spend a lot of time alone with their work and their ideas, it is essential that they get support in other areas of their lives. And WHOA does this apply to money. The isolation artists experience with their financial fears, shame, and overwhelm keeps them locked in their cycle of behaviors. Consider finding someone whom you love and trust who also wants to increase their financial literacy and change their money habits. You can work in tandem, helping each other with difficult tasks, overcoming avoidance, and cheering each other on.

PRACTICAL SKILLS

No matter your current financial situation or level of financial literacy, my hope is that you will create reasonable, achievable goals, something you can accomplish within six to eighteen months. What are the "best" methods for changing your financial reality? Which financial advisor's advice should you adhere to? I believe the best financial plan is the one you'll stick to. Different financial experts will tell you different advice and methods, so, rather than telling you who to learn from, I think it's useful to get advice from a range of financial experts (see Further Reading at the end of this book) and develop a plan that you know you can follow.

I believe financial change works best when we identify concrete, short-term goals and create a few behavior modifications that will get us there. Each time you reach a short-term financial goal, you'll be motivated to meet the next goal. I don't find sustainable, longitudinal success in making drastic, radical financial overhauls. But if you're someone who is super motivated by a complete 180, maybe that's right for you! I see the appeal. I didn't quit smoking by tapering off. I had to go cold turkey.

Money gives us comfort, convenience, and choices, but it doesn't equate to a sense of being safe. We may imagine an amount of money and think if we just had that in savings or got this much money to pay down debts, then we'd feel safe. The problem is, when we equate a number with safety, we're looking to the wrong place

for security. When we finally hit that amount in our savings or get a windfall to pay down debts, we find the number changes and the safety barometer moves ever out of reach.

Safety comes from building and participating in community, whether that is family, chosen family, friends, or spiritual communities. Being an active member of a loving community can generate the feelings of safety we crave. Beyond financial support, a community can respond to emergencies, celebrate successes, help one another, and see each other through the ups and downs of a lifetime. Knowing that we have people we trust and who trust us, we build the sense of safety we wish for. That safety will travel with you through all your financial turns.

FINANCIAL LITERACY

You know which voices of financial advice make your skin crawl. Maybe it's an auntie, your abuelo, a co-worker, the play cousin you see when visiting back home. You don't know if their advice is any good because it doesn't stick; you ignore it and wait for them to stop talking. The voice could be a disembodied financial expert droning away on cable news or AM radio, which also repels you. There are too many voices around us, telling us what we should do with money; parsing out these voices for accuracy and nonjudgmental advice is overwhelming. How do we find someone to listen to and trust in the world of personal finance?

I want you to use a sense of curiosity to find a couple of financial experts that you can learn from and maybe even enjoy. I'll refer you to a few in the Further Reading section, but this is only a point of departure. The challenge is for you to glean financial information from different sources, seeing where they overlap and where they disagree, and identify which voices present information that you understand and which format they use: books, articles, listicles, podcasts, live radio, courses, and workbooks. You will observe as if you are a sociologist, collecting information about how our financial systems work and how individuals operate within them.

It is important to notice whether it is difficult to receive information from some voices because of their gender, race, or any other identity. I'm white and I address in my workshops the ways racism, wage gaps, and economic injustice are inextricably tied, and, therefore, some artists of color may have trouble learning from me or from other white people talking about money. Me, I've had trouble listening to financial experts who are men. I get too angry about sexism and gender wage gaps, which

makes it impossible to focus. This is OK! We're fortunate to live in a time when there are many, many more voices in the financial-expertise realm, so you can find experts of color, women, queer people, immigrants, and people who had to start from scratch as adults. The podcast realm has outstanding financial podcasts by women of color and queer women, such as Reema Khrais's "This Is Uncomfortable," Farnoosh Torabi's "Ask Farnoosh," Kara Perez and Tanja Hester with "The Fairer Cents," "Bad with Money" with Gaby Dunn, and Bola Sokunbi's "The Clever Girls Know." There are even artists and writers who have lots of financial literacy training to offer. Find the voices you relate to and want to learn from.

SPENDING REAL TALK

Many financial advisors recommend closely tracking your spending, and I do, too. I've done this many times in my life and it always provides useful information about my habits and the current cost of living. We can't do anything about the specifics until we know what they are, so first I ask you to conduct an exercise I've dubbed Tiny Notebook, in which you obtain a very small notebook, one that fits in your pocket or a bag and can easily travel with you everywhere. I prefer you do not use your phone because I don't want to encourage any more screen time than you already have.

In your Tiny Notebook, dedicate one page per day for three months. Each day, record every cent you spend: the amount, for what, and how you spent the money (PayPal, Venmo, check, debit card, cash, credit card, automatic withdrawal, or any other of the many ways we can spend money). This means that you'll look at your bank account frequently to catch any expenses you've missed. At the end of each week, add the data from your Tiny Notebook into a spreadsheet according to category: rent/mortgage, groceries, utilities, and so on. Let's call the resulting document a spending plan instead of a budget, since the b-word makes people twitchy.

Why three months? That's so long! It's true, but three months, a whole quarter of the year, will give you more accurate information than just one month. Any single month will likely be an anomaly in which you spent a lot more or a lot less than your average. By capturing three months of spending data, you can learn your true cost of living. It's important that you do not make major changes to your spending while

you're doing Tiny Notebook, although artists invariably tell me that writing down what they are spending does make them a little more mindful and checked-in to nonessential expenses.

You will capture three months of reality: rent or mortgage, groceries, childcare, medical costs, utilities, phone bill, restaurants, clothing, hair care, beauty and body, tithing and donations, insurance, car payments, monthly debt payments, pet costs, money given to family members, emergencies, and everything else. There will undoubtedly be categories of spending that you would've missed (dry cleaning is something for which I often forget the cost and frequency). Be sure to track down annual or quarterly costs like different insurance policies. Tiny Notebook may be difficult to adjust to for the first several days, but I bet after a week, you will do it without thinking.

For the duration of your three months of Tiny Notebook, I want you to also track all your income. Many artists get paid from a number of different sources; they get paid in cash, or they receive payments irregularly. That makes it easy to miss income. I want you to know exactly how much money you earn each month, from what source, and whether the income is W-2 or 1099-based—does the entity paying you take out taxes or not? Keep this information in your Tiny Notebook, too: When were you paid, by who, through what means (direct deposit, cash, PayPal, etc.), and was it already taxed or not? Add this information into your spreadsheet on another page. After three months, you'll have an accurate set of data about your income and your expenses. You'll also be in the habit of checking your bank accounts frequently, something we need to do in the age of so much identity theft.

SELECTING GOALS

Over the course of your adult lifetime, your financial goals may resemble something like this: no debt (including student loans), an emergency savings equivalent to about six months of your fixed monthly expenses, ample and growing retirement investments, 529-qualified tuition plans if you have children, and additional money invested besides your retirement plans. Does this sound impossible? Or only feasible if you live to be 237? It's OK, we're starting with just the next step. Wherever you are is exactly where you are supposed to be. Now would be a good time for some mindfulness tools, visualizing your future self, for whom you are doing this hard work.

First you will select a short-term goal. Again, this goal should be something you think you can accomplish within six to eighteen months. While you're learning financial literacy from some new voices and tracking three months' worth of income and expenses, you'll collect some simple information that will help you select your first goal:

1. How much money did you gross (total income before taxes) last year?
2. How much money are you projected to earn this year?
3. What is the total of all your debts and what types of debts are they?
4. What is the total of all your cash assets (money in your bank accounts, investments, retirement accounts, certificates of deposit, cash you have stashed in a boot deep in your closet for the apocalypse)?

Looking at the data, you can select one short-term goal toward which you will work first. Examples include: paying down a credit card, getting pricey dental work, reducing student loan debt by a certain percentage, building your first \$2,000 in emergency savings, opening and contributing to a Roth IRA or another retirement account, paying off a car loan or personal loan, setting aside money in your child's 529 plan, or paying a previous year's taxes. There are many examples, large and small; choose a goal specifically tailored to you and something you feel eager—and would be proud—to accomplish. There is no financial goal too small.

BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

How will you meet this goal? Where will the money come from that you're going to save or use to pay down debts? The answer is straightforward: Reduce expenses, increase income, or both. Once you've completed three months of Tiny Notebook, you will have a spreadsheet filled with three months of income and expense data. Looking at the expenses, you'll find some are fixed and some are variable. Fixed expenses are things that happen monthly or semi-regularly that are virtually unchangeable: rent or mortgage, utilities, car payment, insurances, and the like. Others will be variable, meaning they change month to month, and you may have some control over them: groceries, takeout and restaurants, art supplies,

entertainment, clothing, personal care, home projects, and others. Think of these variable expenses as a big mixing console that a musician might use. You can turn up and down variable expenses temporarily in order to free up money for other costs.

For many of my workshop participants, they decide to “turn down” spending in a few variable categories, including restaurants/ bars, entertainment, shopping, donations, art supplies, books, music, babysitters, and many others that will pop up in your spreadsheet of expenses. Turning down an expense is not the same as deleting it. You will still need to buy groceries, but you may opt to decide in advance how much—based on your three months of data—you will allocate to that line item. Or you may decide to eat out, get drinks, or order takeout just once a month instead of once a week (or more). Not forever, just temporarily in order to free up money toward another goal.

How do you turn down some variable expenses? There are many ways and you may need to experiment to see what works for you. I’ll give you some examples:

- ✦ **The Envelope Method**—at the beginning of the month, you take out your week or month’s allocation for groceries, or eating/drinking out, art supplies, whatever category you are temporarily turning down. Once the money has run out, that category is over for the week or month. This is effective but there were times in my life when I didn’t have the cash flow to do this method.
- ✦ **Un-enroll from Marketing**—use an “un-enroll me” service (they are free) to unsubscribe yourself from all newsletters, including shopping, travel, pleas for money, and others. When you don’t have the sale, the secret discount code, or the request for money in front of you every day, it won’t be on your mind as much.
- ✦ **Restricted Access**—remove your debit and credit cards from PayPal, Venmo, Amazon Prime, food delivery apps, ride sharing apps, or any other places you’ve identified as sites where you might reduce spending. Putting a barrier between you and spending money will encourage a pause, a moment during which you can think through the purchase.

When you examine your three months of spending, you will likely identify some clear places where you can reduce spending, at least temporarily. The money you don't spend on these categories should then be used toward your short-term goal. For people who identify restaurants, bars, takeout, and food delivery as a category you want to turn down, you're in good company! It's so easy to overspend in this area without noticing. Something phenomenal happens when you decide how much you're allocating to this category every month: You start to carefully consider where you want to eat and with whom. You'll ask yourself, "Do I really want to eat that food and do I want to eat it with these people?" If you don't know how to cook anything and fear for your life as someone who meal preps, get your library card and check out a couple of cookbooks or cooking basics books. Your future self wants you to learn to cook a few simple meals.

How do you get more money? First, take a look at how you currently earn money. If you are employed, when is the last time you got a raise? Is it time to make a case for one and then to decide how you're allocating the extra money? If you are self-employed or earn money selling goods or services (including your art), is it time to increase your prices or fees? This is another relatively quick and simple way to increase your income. It can be hard for a lot of my clients to ask for money, to increase their prices, and to advocate for their raises, all of which is related to everything discussed earlier in this chapter. Naming one's own price is particularly tricky for us. The best advice I've ever received as a self-employed person when I started out as a freelancer was from an older mentor in my life. She said, "Ask for as much as you can say with a straight face."

Once you've covered those bases (asked for a raise, increased your own prices and rates), you may want to look for temporary ways to make extra money. This could be assisting someone, babysitting, dog walking, bookkeeping, editing, building websites, subletting, graphic design, retail, temp work, service jobs—anything that could bring in money and would be temporary. Since you need to make time for your creative practice each week, I don't want the extra, temporary work to take over your life. Again, this extra income will have a very specific plan—paying off a debt or building savings.

Now, tell someone supportive about your financial plan. Explain what your goal is and how you're going to reach it. Ask them for specific support along the path: words of encouragement, a night of cooking each other dinner instead of hitting a

restaurant, company as you look at your financial data, daily texts asking how you're doing—whatever will be helpful for you and keep you focused.

OK, that was a lot of information and instruction! But even reading this chapter is forward motion with your personal finance. Now take the next step, whatever that may be in your life. Over time, using the tools in this chapter and the Further Reading at the book's end, your relationship to money, both earning it and spending it, will shift. As you reach financial goals, your confidence in and knowledge of how money works will grow, as will your willingness to make choices that are grounded in your values for your life, your community and family, and your future.

4. Stevie Anntonym, *The Lesbian Lexicon*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Pegacorn Press, 2015).



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CHAPTER FIVE

The fear that all this will end. The fear that it won't.

—RAE ARMANTROUT, "PRAYERS"

All day, my mind vibrates with a blitz of fearful thoughts. Yours, too, I imagine. Fear is evolutionary; our brains evolved all this fear to keep us alive. Back away from that snarling tiger, the built-in fear warns us. It's easy to understand the innate fear that ensures my physical safety: heights, fire, large animals, people with guns, sudden loud noises, and a tap on the shoulder when I think I am alone. These fears make sense to me; each stimulus could lead to danger, so my brain is simply working to keep me safe. What a nice brain!

Then we have all the other fears, the ones that, when we poke around, seem groundless: public speaking, trying something new, taking up space. We know intellectually these fears are unsubstantiated, yet they can be paralyzing. These kinds of fears may be cultural, familial, or personal; they come from a confluence of people and experiences. When we speak these kinds of fears aloud, they may sound ridiculous. We're embarrassed about them, but then others nod in recognition, and we feel understood. No fear is unique; there is no new fear under the sun. Nobody is alone in a specific fear. A quick Internet scan will confirm online community exists for even the most esoteric fears and phobias.

I've observed that many of my clients' fears ultimately arrive at the same place: I'll die alone, penniless. A client starts out with fear that is commonplace for artists: sending an e-newsletter announcing a new project, being rejected from an opportunity, asking a friend for help, or sharing success on social media. I'll respond to the fear by asking the artist repeatedly, "So what? And then what?" Talking through to the fear's conclusion, inevitably the artist lands at homelessness and death.

Alone and penniless, without a home—this is reminiscent of the evolutionary fear. Naturally, we have a deep, instinctual fear of total abandonment. Would our ancestors have survived alone? We need the safety and support of other people, whether that is family, friends, neighbors, or a broader community. What makes me

curious is how these artists' everyday fears become inextricably linked to desertion, poverty, and death. Why do we catastrophize our fears in this way? And what do we do about it?

Recently a client shared with me her consuming fear of asking friends for help, which was the precise task I asked of her. At my request, she had come up with a short list of professionally successful friends in her field. My client froze after making the list; she was terrified to ask anyone on the list for career advice. We talked it through; as she listed the terrible things that would happen if she reached out to these friends, I asked her over and over again, "And then what?" Within four "And then what?" queries, she was dying alone in the street. I pointed out that there were thousands and thousands of steps between asking a successful friend for a strategy meeting and the isolated, impoverished death she dreads. But I get it; none of this is rational.

Our everyday fears—of asking for help, rejection, being ridiculed, making mediocre work—can feel in our bodies like the primal fear of certain danger. Maybe you are afraid of a plane crash or maybe you're afraid people won't like your Instagram post. Either way, the fear is powerful, and it may inhibit behavior that otherwise would serve you and your work. How and when the fear impacts behavior—that's what we need to investigate.

To be radically transparent, I am afraid every single time I sit down to write this book. The fears are varied, but here is the constellation: What if I can't think of anything good to write? What if I can't think of anything to write at all? What if I write the wrong thing? What if my readers hate what I write? What if they take to the Internet to lacerate my good name? What if my white privilege and racial bias keep me from writing anything meaningful for artists of color? What if I neglect artists who are outside my experience, such as parents, people younger or older than me, or undocumented artists? What if this is the last book I ever publish? What if it's too self-helpy? What if it's not self-helpy enough? What if I'm not smart enough? What if I can't do it perfectly on the first try and what if that means I shouldn't do it at all? What if my advice isn't helpful? What if I am not good enough?

As I read and re-read that list, I recognize the similarity to the fears of every artist I know. My fears are not unique! I try to cultivate compassion for myself, just like I do for the artists in my life. I smile at the list and think, "Hello, old friends." Some days, the fear keeps me from writing very much or at all. Other days, I feel insecure

as I write, sabotaging the writing by editing as I type rather than just hitting a word count, knowing I'll improve the work later. But there are also days that I choose to both confront and comfort the fear. I know it's not going anywhere, so I relent, inviting it in rather than beating it down or numbing it away. Some of my fears will come true; others will not. I have no control over the future or over other people. I can only control what I do right now. There are some fears I can do something about while other fears are just phantoms.

I don't recommend trying to conquer fear. Instead, I advocate that you live with fear, get acquainted with it, understand its consequence in your life, and take action even when you're scared. We could wait a lifetime to be rid of fear only to die with the very same ones we grew up with. Who has time for that? My favorite plan for dealing with fear is something I've heard floating around 12-step programs and various therapies for years: the three As, which are awareness, acceptance, and action. This is the specific order. The three As are useful for a broad range of emotions; let's consider how they can be particularly effective for engaging and navigating fear.

AWARENESS

It's essential that you first become aware of your fears. Fears, like all other thoughts, zip around our minds, a distressed yellow jacket's nest of activity. Thoughts, like heartbeats, happen all day without our conscious choosing. Your mind is buzzing, and your blood is flowing; these happen because you are sentient and a living human. Noticing your fearful thinking is a skill, to be sure. I'm aware of just a fraction of my fears and that is after years of therapy, meditation, 12-step work, and many other tools to better navigate my mind and experiences. As you get to know yourself better, become more acquainted with your interior, you can sink down past the surface fears into the subterranean levels. Deep down below is where we find possibility for transformation.

Begin by making a fears list. Your list can be the classic, bullet point form—my favorite—or something more reflective of how you think and process information: visually with a collage or text that creates a shape, as a voice-memo recording, written onto slips of paper that are deposited into a certain vessel—maybe it's lipstick on a mirror. Keep adding to the list, in whatever form you use, as you

become aware of more fears. Once you begin noticing and capturing your fearful thoughts, you'll identify others. It's not that you're becoming more fearful, you're simply becoming more aware of fear.

ACCEPTANCE

Look at all these fears you're finding! Some are funny, some obvious. Some make you ashamed, and others are deeply confusing. Thank the fears that keep you alive. I ask that you consider all the fears with radical acceptance. With no judgment, think about your fears as a data set collected on your fact-finding mission; you are a scientist gathering information about your interior. These are just your fears, and they are no better or worse than anyone else's fears. They are not bigger. They are not evidence you are bad or weak. They are an indication that you are a person, having a human experience. The discomfort, shame, or guilt that your group of fears produces should also be included in your radical acceptance. Acknowledge all of it, in its totality, and say, "Hello, old friends."

Some of our fears make us feel ashamed or embarrassed. We believe we shouldn't have them or that we need to get rid of them. Maybe we were taught that fear is the same as weakness, and that this is bad. Perhaps some of our fears are based in values and beliefs we reject—fears of people who are different than us, fears of people we were told are dangerous. We don't want to act on those fears because we know they are based in hate and prejudice. But what if accepting the fear's existence isn't the same as acting on the fear? Some fears, simply by acknowledging and accepting them, will wither or even disappear.

Fear isn't bad; it just is. Fearful thoughts and fear-based thinking simply occur because you have a brain and it is hardwired to be afraid. Some of this is evolutionary, some is from the culture and context in which you have lived, some is connected to your family of origin, and some is just your own nature. When we become aware of our fears and radically accept them all, we are in a position to make choices about them.

Again, accepting your fear doesn't mean you embrace it or will behave based on it. Accepting isn't the same as condoning. Accepting your fear means you are aware of it and agree that, "Yes, there it is . . . there is my fear." Some of your fears contain helpful information while others are primal; still others are merely the detritus of human culture.

ACTION

Once we are aware of and accepting of our fear, we can do something about it. By this stage, some of your fears have likely evaporated. Phantom fears disappear once they are named. Other fears shrink down to a manageable size after they've been identified and accepted; they can each become their small, right size. There are probably a lot of fears that are affecting your behavior, possibly in a self-limiting way. Fear can both inhibit and generate behavior, and that's what we want to work with.

When our fears impact our behavior in a harmful way—toward ourselves or other people—we can use the fear as a signal to correct our actions, bringing our behavior into congruence with our ethics, aspirations, goals, and visions for beloved community. American culture is filled with examples of the ways unexamined, unchallenged fear produces behavior that is harmful. Our learned fear of groups of othered people (usually based on identity, culture, or circumstance) produces violent and negligent behavior.

Growing up in a mostly white, low-income community where people had limited education, I was messaged in overt and covert ways to be afraid of people of color, gay people, homeless people, cities, other countries, some religions, and most change. Over my lifetime, I have had to identify and accept my fears (laughing at the ones that implicate me and all my friends' backgrounds and lives) and then take action to unlearn, challenge, and behave in opposition to them. Rather than beating myself up for having them, I'm more successful when I accept that fear is taught and socialized into me. I am a product of the culture I come from, though embracing and acting upon fear isn't inescapable. As an adult with a critical consciousness and access to libraries full of books, I need to question and unlearn many fears. My longtime friend Dr. Marcia Chatelain says, "Being an asshole isn't inevitable."

But many of our fears only implicate ourselves, limiting our lives and disrupting our personal, professional, and creative objectives. Conversations with my clients often focus on their fears, especially those related to their art. Their fear is stoked when they consider doing something for their art: applying for a grant, showing work to another artist, inviting friends to their show, trying a new way of working, investing money in their practice. When they don't know how to navigate the fear, they avoid taking action. Procrastination, that slippery path to self-sabotage, is

directly related to fear. We can become so consumed with fear that we avoid what we want and what we love. Inaction seems safer than any of our fears becoming actualized.

Consider the following crowdsourced list of artists' fears, comprising just a fraction of those that artists share with me. How many do you identify with? What else would you add?

I am afraid of . . .

- ✦ being successful and the pressure to replicate that success
- ✦ not being original or that my work is inherently unoriginal
- ✦ getting older and facing ageism in my discipline
- ✦ having a kid and trying to maintain my practice
- ✦ not living up to my potential
- ✦ discovering later in life that I should've taken a different path
- ✦ having my art consumed mainly by white people or experienced out of its context
- ✦ being called out, shamed, or humiliated on social media
- ✦ being mediocre or making second-rate work
- ✦ not having enough money for life, for my family, or for my projects
- ✦ relying on social media for my self-worth
- ✦ not being liked or valued by other people
- ✦ being visible; being invisible
- ✦ taking up space
- ✦ starting a new project
- ✦ promoting my work and what people will say about me when I do
- ✦ unintentionally harming someone through my art
- ✦ not being a real artist
- ✦ receiving any kind of criticism, constructive or otherwise
- ✦ making bad art

- ♦ failing
- ♦ receiving any opinions about my practice
- ♦ being a self-indulgent artist
- ♦ making art that doesn't matter
- ♦ embarrassing myself
- ♦ dying alone, penniless (I told you, this comes up a lot!)
- ♦ being discovered to be a fraud
- ♦ having corporate jobs ruin my practice and my drive to make art
- ♦ leaving my job to focus on my art
- ♦ never finding a partner who accepts and understands that I am an artist
- ♦ having my identities keep me from success in mainstream culture

What about the *action* in the three A's of awareness, acceptance, and action? How does one have a fear and then take action? And what action should one take, exactly? Action is important when it comes to fears related to your art practice. In order to be free and to evolve, your work needs to have space surrounding it, and fear is suffocating and constricting. Fear keeps us small and unwilling to take up space, take risks, be vulnerable, be seen.

Often, the solution is to take *contrary action*. This means that you are afraid to do something, but you choose to do it anyway. It can also mean that you identify and accept the fearful thought and then do the opposite of what your scared mind is telling you. As you examine your fears list and identify some that affect your art practice, go ahead and establish a corresponding contrary action for each fear.

ROCK-CLIMBING VISUALIZATION

When an artist has difficulty taking any of kind of action, I work with them to examine the fear and break down a contrary action into micro-steps. I ask them to imagine themselves as a rock climber on a cliff. They have their protective gear (my office couch and pillows) and their climbing partner (me); they are not alone and there are safety precautions in place. They are very afraid to move because it feels

risky and they fear a big fall, even with the protection. Knowing that they need to move, they want to move, and they no longer want to be stuck in this particular spot on the side of the cliff, I ask them to consider this, “What would be the smallest step that is movement but still feels safe?” We parse out the task they are afraid of into the smallest, safest–feeling steps.

For example, the client who was terribly afraid to ask her successful friends for help said she would be willing to make a list of such friends and rank the order in which she would be likely to ask, if she ever became willing to do so. That is movement! Taking that small step—making the list of friends and sorting them in order of accessibility—was movement on the mountain. No longer stuck in the exact spot, she took a micro–step, which helped her become willing to take the contrary action of asking a friend for help.

Another example comes from Mickey, a black, nonbinary writer from Oakland who was in the midst of a prestigious fellowship. They’d become afraid to ask the staff at the fellowship any questions or reach out for any help. Their many years of gender socialization, anti–black racism, and family of origin taught them not to take up too much space and that asking for anything at all was too much. Together, we devised a list of resources Mickey wanted for their project. The staff, I reminded Mickey, was invested in their success; they had chosen them as the recipient of the fellowship, after all. Mickey was horrified by the list we created, and they indicated they couldn’t fathom asking for any of it. The list ranged from information to introductions to additional resources—all very reasonable and necessary to Mickey’s leveraging the fellowship for further opportunity. I asked Mickey to take a tiny step—just write an email to the staff asking for what they wanted and needed. They didn’t have to send it, just write it and send it to me. Mickey agreed and wrote up a draft email; I pressed them to include the many resources we’d outlined in our session and they conceded. Once the email was fully fleshed out, I told them it looked great and very reasonable, and to please send it. Mickey sent the email and within days the fellowship staff was working to help get them the resources they asked for.

Finally, Sandrine, a white lesbian sculptor in Portland, admitted to me that she avoided having any studio visits with curators and artists who asked for one. Studio visits are a crucial part of receiving exhibition opportunities, which I knew that Sandrine wanted, so we dug into why. Sandrine revealed that she was afraid of how awkward and weird the conversation might be. I asked Sandrine to come up with

several sculptor friends with whom she was very comfortable, with whom conversation easily flows. Sandrine wasn't afraid to talk to her friends about art; she just hadn't considered that this could serve as a warm-up for a studio visit with someone she doesn't know. She agreed to invite several artist friends into the studio to start talking about her recent work and to have several positive, comfortable experiences first. Again, this was a micro-step toward the contrary action.

AND THEN WHAT

This is a simple exercise you can do on your own or with someone you love. "And then what?" helps you draw a fear out to its conclusion. Here's how it goes: Take one of your many fears. Stating what you're afraid of, you are prompted (or prompt yourself) with a repeated "and then what?" as you consider the next, successive fear or negative outcome. This exercise often shines light on the fear by bringing in some much-needed levity, diminishing the fear's size and its hold over you. Spoiler alert! The finale is usually dying alone, penniless.

ASKING A FRIEND

When you are taking a contrary action, doing something that you're afraid to do but proceeding anyway, it helps to simply tell a friend what you are going to do. This can be a brief phone call, text, or verbal check-in; any communication can work. Essentially, you make contact with the friend before you take the action. Tell them about your fear and what specifically you are going to do anyway. Let them know you're going to contact them as soon as you're done for a hearty congratulations and a supportive follow-up. Having the accountability of a loved one waiting for you to complete the action can be incentive enough to complete it. This technique is sometimes called "bookending," and it can be effective in all sorts of difficult situations. Knowing you're in the soft, liminal space between the bookends makes the temporary discomfort and fear more manageable. You may inspire the loved one to also take a contrary action at the same time.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A FEAR

Choose a fear that you know is affecting your art practice. Trace its appearance and impact throughout your creative practice to date and imagine how it will continue to affect you over a lifetime. The fear of making bad or mediocre art is a good example. How far back can you trace this fear and how has it shaped your choices, what you perceived to be available to you, what you asked for, and how you treated your work and yourself? How could this fear, left lurking, limit you over a lifetime?

Fear is unavoidable throughout life. You will have all kinds of fear because you are human. Behavior rooted in fear, however, isn't inevitable. My hope for you is that you will first identify your fears, and then welcome them in for consideration. Then, radically accept all of them, knowing that acceptance isn't condoning or embracing, but simply acknowledging the existence of your fears. Once you are aware and accepting of your fear, then I want you to find the places in which you want to take action. Think of this action as service on behalf of your art.



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CHAPTER SIX

Everybody has their sadness. And most people are scared of it.

—MARY GAITSKILL, *BAD BEHAVIOR*

Alejandra's behavior was baffling me. For nearly five years, we'd been working together to raise money for her project, which would be her biggest work yet. Alejandra's research-driven musical would tell an underreported story from Los Angeles's Mexican American history. The project was very personal to her, linking her city and her family to a larger political movement that changed both culture and policy.

We'd been quite successful so far, raising money from several funders and securing partnership with a presenter, which would serve as an enthusiastic co-producer of the work. Alejandra's project was shaping up to be a huge success, and I was really excited for her and proud of our achievements. I sourced several additional grants we could apply for when, gradually, she drifted away. She missed a couple of deadlines and I found her underprepared for our appointments, which surprised me.

I knew Alejandra to be deeply committed to the stories her work explored—the experiences of Latinx communities. Never in a million years would Alejandra drop this project. It was part of her family's story and a reflection of her own history.

I couldn't understand what was happening with Alejandra, and when pressed, she didn't seem to know, either. Wondering whether she wanted to discontinue our work, I found myself taking her behavior personally, which was a clue that I needed to rethink my strategy. I backed up conceptually so I could understand Alejandra more holistically, and then it dawned on me: She didn't want to work on the project because it was so sad. Her project drew on cultural and personal traumas that were painful to dwell within and she needed to spend a lot of time alone in the stories to create the work. Naturally, this became depressing as she got deeper in, and she was both consciously and unconsciously avoiding it.

Tentatively, I brought this up with Alejandra during a subsequent consulting session and she was relieved and teary as she agreed with me. It was a sad story to be in for so long, all alone. It took a lot of effort to pick up her work each week, and this was compounded by her stressful day job, which could also be draining and depressing. Her grief was becoming a creative block. We both knew, however, that her grief would be an important tool for the work. Together, we started brainstorming solutions for Alejandra to be less alone in the work and to navigate the grief activated by her project.

GRIEF AND ART

Grief is part of life, throughout life. Though we may be afraid of it, it isn't bad; it simply exists, a shared human experience. Over a lifetime, we grieve loss, death, and change of every kind. Grief can, for some, become cumulative; feeling acute grief of a recent loss can tap into deep wells of older grief. Grief has its own timetable. Like water, it will find its way through a crack, seep through a wall, and take down entire structures if we don't learn to ride the swells. We can't will or wish it away. We can try to put it off, but it will find its way to the surface. If you have experienced major grief in your life, you may be able to trace the unexpected ways it manifested: irritability, depression, disorientation, profound sadness, lethargy, manic behavior, anxiety, mood swings, anger, and other expressions.

Grief can be frightening for us; its enormity—or our fear of its potential size and effects—may motivate us to avoid it at any cost. We may believe that we can detour around it through work, substances, other people, or sleep. I think of grief not as a looming threat, waiting for an in-between moment to finally nab us, but rather as a sorrowful companion, a wave returning us to the reality and conditions of our interior. Our capacity to grieve is connected to our capacity to love.

For many artists, their practice is a way for them to traverse grief. For people who have trouble accessing it, art—both the making and the taking in—can be a vital conduit for feeling and expression. I, for example, sob every time I hear “He Stopped Loving Her Today” sung by George Jones; this song by my grandparents’ favorite singer triggers my bereavement over their deaths. Pain that is otherwise difficult for me to feel is immediately summoned by that song. I know that the sadness is coming within the first few bars, whether I play the song or happen upon it.

Often, I am surprised by grief stirred through art; it's unpredictable. Wandering the exhibition *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985* at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2017, I came across a conceptual artwork by Peruvian artist Teresa Burga. *Autorretrato. Estructura. Informe*, 9.6.1972 (Self-portrait. Structure. Report, 9.6.1972) included a sound recording of her heartbeat over the course of a single day. I stood alone in the installation, listening to Burga's heartbeat, surprised by my hot tears. It felt so intimate to listen to this woman's body, someone I would never know; it was so generous of the artist to share this closeness with me. The enormity of the exhibition, the artists featured in it, and the feminist politics of Latin America discussed in the work suddenly caught up with me, and I cried listening to Burga's heart beating, realizing that it would one day, like mine, stop.

The same year, in New York, I saw the play *Indecent* written by Paula Vogel and directed by Rebecca Taichman. Friends urged my wife and me to see the play while we were in New York and I bought tickets, not knowing what it would be about. *Indecent* tells the story of the 1906 play *God of Vengeance* by Sholem Asch, which featured the earliest lesbian scene on Broadway; the play engages obscenity trials, Yiddish theater, early twentieth-century lesbian relationships, and warnings of the Holocaust to come. I saw the play several months after my older brother had died suddenly, and, still in shock, I was numb and emotionless. My wife and I sobbed through most of *Indecent* and, crying and chain-smoking outside the theater afterward, I purchased another ticket on my phone to see the show the very next night. The play dislodged a sticky, enormous wad of buildup surrounding the grief, which helped me feel and move through some pain that summer.

Thinking about Paula Vogel and Rebecca Taichman, Teresa Burga, and songwriters Bobby Braddock and Carly Putman, who wrote the song that George Jones made famous (though Jones had believed it was too sad to be a hit), I wonder whether and how grief interacted with creating their works. Did they find themselves overcome at points in the research or development of the work? Did they avoid the project or find themselves bewildered at their own procrastination? Did they need help to complete the work? Does the work, or the memory of making it, unearth different feelings as well as, or rather than, grief?

GRIEF AND THE ARTIST

My clients' specific sensitivities and observational skills, which enable them to make their work, also create a profound capacity for grief (and other emotions). I imagine my clients swathed in a kind of netting covered in bright little nerve endings, opening them to sensory absorption and making them highly empathic. Artists can have a specific permeability for grief; sometimes the porousness becomes overwhelming. Alejandra is one of many clients who have come up against significant grief stirred by a project. Over time, I've learned to look for this in the artists I work with so I can address it earlier when issues surface. When a client becomes avoidant of their work, is bewildered by procrastination, or considers abandoning a project, I bring up grief in our session so we can contemplate its role and relationship to their work. It's not always the answer, and sometimes it's just one of a multitude of concerns, but grief comes up with enough of my clients to warrant this conversation.

Artists' grief can surface from within the work they're creating, from outside life circumstances, or both. Regardless of its nature and source, the pain can profoundly affect an artist's ability to be in the work, their discipline, even their desire and willingness to make work at all. My clients, like all people, experience the full scope of grief from death, loss, and change. They also frequently make work that engages difficult themes—family, trauma, systemic oppression, memory, death—which naturally has significant consequences on their well-being. In these instances, I have found they need to bolster their mental health practices and emotional support for the duration of the project.

Do not underestimate the impact of difficult themes in your artwork on your lived experiences. Equally, grief that you experience from your life circumstances may affect your practice, just like it affects other parts of your life. Do you find yourself avoiding, procrastinating, or otherwise dreading your art? Consider whether there may be underlying grief churning beneath, trying to tell you something. Your art practice could be part of the solution for working through grief.

We can have difficulty pinpointing grief or understanding if it is indeed grief that's surfacing in our lives. Grief is a slippery shape-shifter! Because it can manifest in so many different ways—anger, irritability, depression, numbness—and because it does not adhere to our feelings schedule or life timetable, we can be surprised to realize that the answer to “What is the matter with me?” is grief. Simple, complicated grief.

Syd, a white artist from Chicago working in video and sound, expressed confusion and shame at her reluctance to go to her studio and make progress on her projects. This avoidance was frustrating her and underscoring beliefs that she didn't deserve to have a studio. In the year we'd worked together, I'd been inspired by her willingness to invest money and time into her creative projects instead of only prioritizing her demanding and draining day job. After a difficult and scrappy childhood and a paycheck-to-paycheck young adult life, Syd was financially stable and surrounded by solid friendships. She'd become willing to admit that she wanted, needed, and could have a studio, and when a great one became available, she took the plunge and committed to it, sharing the space with other interesting and generous artists. But Syd found herself unwilling to go to the studio in the weeks off from her demanding day job, and she felt ashamed. Instead of going to her studio, she found herself in an emotional paralysis at home, feeling depressed and weepy.

I had a hunch, knowing about Syd's chaotic childhood and her years of frantically patching things together, that maybe grief was contributing to the situation. It sounded to me like Syd had finally established a stable, safe, and fairly predictable adult life. She had a solid partnership, enough money and work, and now a big studio shared with friendly, hardworking artists. I thought perhaps, after so much rushing and working and striving, now that Syd's life was laid out, there was finally room for feelings, when there hadn't been before.

You know how you can get really sick immediately after some big deadline? A big test or project, maybe it's a holiday break during a crazy time in your professional life—it seems like our immune systems can eke by on stress and anxiety, just enough to keep us going until there is a moment of pause, and then BAM! We get the flu. Grief can be like that. We can keep it at bay—maybe it manifests as anxious energy or stays subterranean until there is a pause—and then a wave of grief comes over us.

Based on my hunch, I brought this up to Syd in session and she wept. She agreed that grief sounded like the appropriate word for what she was feeling. Nothing was a problem in her life. Her work, creative life, financial situation, health, and relationships were all good, which is why, I think, the grief of her younger years made its way to the surface. It was time to feel and navigate this grief because she was now ready and able to do it. By making a beautiful adult life for herself, Syd had created the conditions to safely feel her grief, and so it arrived.

HELP, I'M GRIEVING!

There are many ways to continue your work while dealing with grief. Many of these tactics, used by my clients and my artist friends, help them also redirect the grief back into the work, deepening its emotional resonance for audiences.

Therapy

You can counter the effects of grief through friends, community, emotional support, and professional help. The pain that your project or your life circumstances is stirring up can then be poured back into your art. Naming is important for understanding, and you may benefit from talking to trusted loved ones and a mental health professional. Talking it out with another person is an effective path to knowing yourself; having someone accurately reflect your words back to you strengthens this understanding. If you've never been to therapy, I highly recommend you try it out soon. Even if there is nothing urgently pulling you to therapy, the experience is akin to taking a class about yourself. You can get to know yourself as you are now and gain a better understanding of your past by working with a therapist. Understanding your relationship to grief and discussing experiences in your life that have conjured grief can be a goal in your therapy.

Rituals

Many artists tell me that they create simple and complex rituals, meaningful just to them, to aid them in entering and exiting the work. This can be anything: lighting a candle, journaling, listening to a specific playlist, twenty minutes of free writing, prayer or meditation, wearing a particular garment while working, or clearing the energy of the space with sound, smoke, aroma, or other tools. Try incorporating ritual into your practice, framing the time you're immersed in the work. Keep what works, and discard what doesn't.

Bookending

One of my favorite methods for doing difficult things is by book-ending the task with a call to someone I love, before and after the task. This can work beautifully to help you move through a grief-filled project. Other artists in your community could be instrumental in helping you navigate a project that is activating grief because they may have been through it before. Find an artist in your community who is also slogging through work that is challenging and commit to calling or texting each other

to check in before you start the work and when you finish for the day. This habit can help you associate the hard, emotional work with loving support, and you get bonus points from me for asking for help! (Note: Bonus points not redeemable for prizes.)

Flexibility

Accept that there will be some days on which you can't do the creative work; instead, you can focus on the business side of the project—for example, marketing, administration and logistics, and applications. Consider moving between multiple projects, maybe one that has more levity or doesn't provoke grief. If you're not the kind of person who likes to have multiple projects at once, engage a different art practice that can give you a reprieve on the days when you cannot face your project but still want to be creatively active. Working in different materials or another discipline can be useful in this case. Your film that is emotionally devastating could be balanced by painting. Your memoir that necessarily digs up your hardest moments can be juxtaposed with dance classes. The music you're recording that makes you sob could be served by a fun collaboration with a friend.

Acceptance

Our grief is beautiful. That statement is easy for me to write in a moment when I'm not anticipating or on the heels of a death or loss or disappointment. But I will experience all these again, just like you. I can recall the intense grief of deaths in my life, people and animals, and appreciate the specific quality of the time when I was really in the depths of it. Profound grieving is unlike any other time for me; my entire brain is rewired and out of sorts. I don't love it, but it is still valuable; it connects me to other humans, and for that I'm grateful.

The vulnerability required to feel and express grief is profound, and allowing it to be part of your practice is a gift to your audiences. I don't mean employing manipulative tactics to make people cry; I know when I am being manipulated and it feels tacky and forced, like the experience of watching most mainstream movies. But when you bring emotional truth to your work, tapping into the grief you are feeling, you will create the conditions for your audiences to feel theirs as well. I believe this is one of the most generous gifts you as an artist can give.

While writing this chapter, I've been on a short book tour with my spouse, whose fourth published book was released recently. A book-length poem, the work was written many years ago and excavated a number of deaths and losses. Each night as

she's read poems from the book in front of bookstore audiences, she's cried. Each night it caught her by surprise, and I watched her friends and fans listening, tearing up as well. The beautiful, sad poems, the poet's visible grief, these created the conditions for her audiences to also feel grief. The catharsis of grieving together in a room stays with us, long after we leave.



**OTHER
PEOPLE**

CHAPTER SEVEN

I don't write about good and evil with this enormous dichotomy. I write about people. I write about people doing the kinds of things that people do.

—OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

I love helping people who are in conflict with each other. Over the years, a number of creative partners have sought out my support to resolve their disagreements, peacefully end collaborations, or work through old resentments in order to preserve their projects and relationships. Professionally, for me, this work is like an enormous human puzzle. These “collaborators in conflict” sessions are filled with detangling words and feelings, unpacking moments that trigger one another’s old family wounds, and bringing feelings to the surface in order to help both parties see their part in the dynamic and to arrive at agreed-upon commitments for forward motion. Deeply engaging human drama in real time is both exhilarating and exhausting. Holding space for people’s vulnerability, anger, disappointment, and fear is a privilege for me, and I’m grateful to the artists willing to show up for this very difficult work.

Group dynamics endlessly fascinate me. In graduate school, I convinced my group therapy instructor that we needed to devote an entire class to watching *Some Kind of Monster*, the 2004 documentary that traces the metal band Metallica’s interpersonal collapse and subsequent group work with a “performance-enhancing coach.” Drawing on group and family therapies, the documentary illuminates the ways in which a band is essentially a family and its members embody their historic family roles. Metallica was in crisis. Bassist Jason Newsted quit the band. Frontman James Hetfield entered rehab for his alcoholism. Drummer Lars Ulrich confronted his decades of resentment over Hetfield’s controlling personality. Guitarist Kirk Hammett, bless him, tried desperately to make peace. The members play out their group dynamics, inhabiting their family roles, and the documentary teems with accumulated resentment.

We live in the world with other people and that spells *conflict*. Group dynamics can unfold in any collection of people: co-workers, roommates, collaborators, theater and dance companies, bands, friend groups, and chosen family. The equation is this: *A group of people in close proximity plus time equals potential conflict*. Me, you, all of us. Identifying and understanding how we behave in groups, the roles and patterns we tend to play out over and over again, can be illuminating and transformative. Knowing that we cannot change another person, only ourselves, is fundamental to building better relationships.

My work with clients often focuses on the artists' relationship with themselves and other people, because our lives are relational. People are our greatest resource and our biggest obstacle. We spend our entire lifetime negotiating our relationships to ourselves and to other people. Because relationships comprise such a vast amount of our lives and attention, it's worth investing time and resources into relating better. It begins with the self; so, like Fräulein Maria advised us in *The Sound of Music*, let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start!

ME, MYSELF, AND I

The longest relationship you will ever have is with yourself. We have to begin here, with you, because this is your primary relationship. This can be a surprising realization; *you* are your most significant relationship. It's so obvious yet difficult to wrap our minds around this. You will be with yourself forever, until you die. Given this, why not do the work necessary to make this fact a happy arrangement rather than punishment? It makes sense to create a stronger, healthier relationship to the self.

This proposition—that you can strengthen your relationship to yourself—is not simple or easy, I realize. It's a lifelong commitment, from here on out. This work will be done forevermore, because as people change, so do their relationships, and *all relationships require tending*. As you grow to be in a better relationship with yourself, your other relationships will be changed, quite often for the better.

Our sense of self can get battered through the years. Our families of origin, cultures and communities, schools, the systemic violence around us, our own brain's chemistry, or a confluence of these can result in eroded self-esteem and a distorted self-perception. This is true for many of my clients; they arrived at adulthood only to begin unlearning and relearning, peeling off the layers of harmful

socialization and buried pain to build up a solid foundation of self-esteem and self-acceptance. Very often, their creative practice is a fundamental component of this process. In fact, artists have a real advantage: One's art can be an enormous tool for healing and recovery.

How do you grow, mend, and improve your relationship to yourself? No surprises in my answer: therapy! Lots of therapy, throughout your life, for lots of purposes. Therapy, as I've said, is like taking a class about yourself, but gentler, and there is neither a grade nor an exam. The relationship with your therapist creates the conditions for change, healing, and acceptance. It's a space and a relationship devoted to you and your well-being.

People give lots of reasons for not going to therapy. It's expensive. Insurance won't cover it. Their family or culture "doesn't go to therapy." (Not true. All kinds of people go to therapy and you can find a therapist from every experience, background, and identity.) Often, the excuse is that it seems hard. That one I accept. Therapy is hard work, and yes, it is an investment, but *whoa*, is it worth it. Having a contented interior and better relationships, a more peaceful mind, liking yourself a lot, taking excellent care of yourself—these outcomes are worth the time and money invested. Before an artist decides that they can't afford therapy, I ask that they exhaust every resource in their community to find affordable therapy choices: friends' recommendations, sliding scale options, community-based clinics, and group therapy. We can't afford to *not* go to therapy. You are worth this investment and your future you will be so grateful. Oh, and 12-step programs are free.

The relationship to the self is paramount for artists. Many of you have to spend much time alone, and that can be painful when it feels particularly bad inside your mind. This can lead to avoidance of one's creative work. If being alone feels terrible, you may tend to avoid anything that requires you to do so. Artists who work on their relationships to themselves through therapy, recovery programs, and other healing modalities find themselves able to sink deeper into their work, willing to experiment and grow in their art without fear of outcomes or judgment. Liking and trusting oneself can open brand-new creative territory.

But what if you feel better? Will you still want to make art? If you're in less pain, recover from addictions, and process old trauma, will your art suffer? Sometimes artists are afraid that pain is the source of the art and without it their well would run dry. As they consider taking medication for anxiety or depression, getting sober,

leaving a relationship, or quitting various substances, they fear that they will somehow be emptied of content, that the pain is what motivates and creates the conditions for art making.

This fear or superstition about needing pain and suffering to create work is a well-worn stereotype with artists, and it's unfounded. For one, not everybody who suffers makes art. Everyone on the planet hurts and artists make up only a small percentage of the population. There is no causal relationship between the two. You make art because you are an artist and it's how you process everything, including pain. What tends to happen, as artists feel better, is that they make more work and they make new kinds of work. They find a new rigor and discipline in their practice, a greater commitment.

Working on your relationship to the self means a growing self-awareness. Knowing yourself well will help you in all other relationships. For example, understanding your role and experience in your family of origin can help you understand what you bring to relationships in the present, how you participate in (or avoid) conflict, and how you tend to interact with different groups of people. This is an informational gold mine!

You are the only person that you can change, but think about it—you have total jurisdiction over how you behave. That's no small thing! But what about your relationships to other humans, all the people you cannot change? Let's consider some of those people in your life.

FAMILIES, BIOLOGICAL AND LOGICAL

The writer Armistead Maupin coined the phrase *logical family* to describe the chosen families we create. This is a familiar trope in queer communities, who have a long history of creating their own families, but it is also legible to others whose families of origin are far away or who are unable or unwilling to be in loving relationships. Even those of us who are very satisfied with our given families still build chosen, logical families with which to navigate the world. Families are a construct, after all, and can be created any way that we need them.

An artist's family has massive impact on their practice. Your family can be a supportive conduit to your creative life, or it can be the biggest hurdle (sometimes it can be both, on the same day). Think about your families, chosen and given. Who do

count among your family? Who is actively part of your life and whose role is limited to that of a voice replaying in your head? What are your family members' individual relationships to your artistic identity and creative practice—none at all, supremely supportive, accepting, actively hostile? What is your relationship to their lives and work?

In an ideal world, an artist would have love, support, and acceptance from family members in regard to their life as a working artist. This is rarely the case, however. Long into their adult lives, artists find that their parents and other caregiving relatives can be dismissive of and unreceptive to their creative pursuits. Sometimes this is couched in financial fear, as in, “We’re afraid you won’t be able to support yourself,” rooted in the belief that an artist cannot both make a living and have a creative practice. Some artists were raised by people who were also artists, but they still feel frustrated at the lack of understanding between the generations. (This lack of understanding is not so surprising; your parents came of age in an entirely different workforce and economy. Their art world is not your art world.)

Often, artists will describe the lonely experience of feeling like the one freaky weirdo in an extended family. They feel misunderstood, which makes them question their choice to not go into law or teaching, move back home, have more children, or enter the family business. They may feel ashamed or dismissive of their perceived level of success, thinking that it ought to be grander in order to justify their choices. Occasionally, this manifests as a latent rebellious adolescent feeling, and these artists—well into middle age—want to scream “Fuck you!” at their elderly relations. We all have our family roles!

If you’ve got a spouse, or plan to share your life with someone, it’s important that you’re honest with this person about the role of your creative practice in your life—which means you need to know this for yourself. Don’t diminish the space your art takes up and don’t expect your significant other to read your mind. Tell your partner how you’d like the relationship to support your art practice and ask what support you can offer in your partner’s life. I like to think of primary romantic partnerships as powerful battery packs; they can energize us to go into the world and be as giant and wonderful as we can be. When the world inevitably batters us, we return to this relationship to recharge and recover.

It’s up to each partner to support the other’s full self, and communication is crucial for this. Walt Whitman told us that we contain multitudes. We mustn’t diminish parts of ourselves for a spouse. If artists don’t show up for their own

creative practices, their sense of self will deteriorate, which will negatively impact their relationships. When we take care of ourselves, we can better show up for the people we love. For artists, this means that to be fully present partners, they've got to tend to their practice.

Some couples comprise two artists. How lucky! Also, I'm so sorry! Two-artist couples are special indeed. These relationships require a lot of communication about how each artist's practice is supported, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes alternating. In couples where the artists also collaborate, the couple will benefit from some boundaries demarcating when they are at home, when they are romantic partners, and when they are working. In this circumstance, it's important that each artist also maintains plenty of regular contact with other people. Two-artist couples need to take special care in navigating competitiveness, particularly in those inevitable moments when one partner's career is receiving more attention.

Artists who have children must figure out how to navigate the family's needs while protecting their own creative practice. I once had a client who was a single mom, and she struggled with guilt every time she prioritized her creative practice in any way, including getting an MFA. She feared there was an inverse relationship between her daughter and her art: If she invested time and money into her art career, then somehow it was directly taking from or harming her daughter. Together we worked on understanding that her practice was essential to her well-being; making space for herself as an artist would enable her to show up as a present parent. Plus, she was modeling for her daughter a grown woman living a fully embodied life and eschewing all the motherhood-as-sacrifice bullshit. Her daughter was watching her mom be a loving parent, continue her education, work various jobs, and protect space for her practice, which would hopefully inform the girl's future, whatever it might look like.

Berkeley artist Miriam Klein Stahl is in a two-artist family with her spouse, the artist Lena Wolff. They have a child, Hazel. Both parents are working, professional artists, and Miriam has also been a public-school teacher for twenty-five years. She describes their experience:

We have a great team at switching out work time with other responsibilities. I am able to make art and books, and teach, only because Lena is minding the house and schlepping our kid around and I am doing that when she needs work time. Having a kid has strangely given me more focus and inspiration to make work that envisions a better world for everyone. Sometimes Hazel is like, "No,

I don't want to go to another art opening," and other times she is so proud to be at an opening for Lena or me. It has been amazing to be able to bring Hazel on book tours and have her be part of the readings or art demos. I can see that she is proud and feels part of the family biz. I feel like all the identities are linked: parent, queer, Jew, artist, teacher. I sometimes worried about her having queerdo artist parents, but we live in Berkeley, so she actually never has the weirdest parents.

Their daughter, Hazel, explains:

I feel an association with the creative part of myself and part of an arts community. I feel like I don't know any other way of being in the world. Having art in my life gives me a way to express myself, and I learned that from my parents.

You need support to build and sustain your practice and art career. You can't do it alone and no successful artist ever has. (There was always support for canonized artists, though sometimes hidden or suppressed by history.) This includes lots of kinds of support from your family. If you find that the support you're getting from your given and chosen family comes up short, this could be an opportunity for working on those relationships or expanding your logical family.

COLLABORATORS

At some point in your career, you may work with other artists. Maybe these will be one-offs or maybe you'll have ongoing collaborators. You may experience conflict in these relationships because of the magic equation: People + togetherness + time = conflict. Conflict is normal. It isn't bad (usually), though it is very common to be afraid of it. Learning how to navigate conflict will help you with your creative collaborations.

A creative collaboration comprises multiple relationships inside of one affiliation. There is the artistic relationship, a friendship (maybe more), and often a business relationship, too. There could be other dimensions—roommates, chosen or given family, spiritual community, employer/employee, and many more. When a relationship is multidimensional like this, it is helpful to parse out each aspect and

address them individually. Sometimes a conflict among collaborators is about the business side of things, which affects the friendship. Perhaps the friendship has been neglected, which impacts the artistic relationship, and so on.

A sustainable collaboration requires that all parties be willing to show up for the multiple dimensions of the relationship. This doesn't mean you have to turn your meetings or practice time into endless processing, but collaboration works better if everyone communicates effectively. The challenge is that you can't control other people; you can only decide what *you* do and say. We have lots of ways of tricking ourselves into believing we can make someone do something, but it's an illusion. Still, in any family system—and remember, people in groups inevitably play out their family roles—if one person changes, the entire system will shift.

Sometimes creative relationships must come to an end. Perhaps one or more of the artists has outgrown the collaboration or the project. Maybe another dimension of the relationship has ended, impacting the artistic connection (e.g., a couple breaks up and their collaboration becomes untenable). Sunsetting a collaboration—drawing it to a close—need not be miserable or toxic. It can be done peacefully, respectfully, and in a way that honors the work the artists have created together.

Artists Chris Vargas and Greg Youmans initiated a creative collaboration not long after they entered into a romantic relationship. Their semiautobiographic web sitcom, *Falling in Love . . . with Chris and Greg*, hilariously addressed issues that were coming up in their nascent romance. In 2007, when they started dating and created the series, Chris and Greg didn't know many other people in a relationship like theirs—between transgender and cisgender gay men—so they used the project to playfully highlight some of the logistics of navigating what was, for them, new terrain. The project lasted until 2013, when both partners agreed to end the series (though their relationship continued). Chris explains:

When we started the project, I had more video editing experience than Greg, so he used the project to learn those skills. Near the end, Greg learned so much but began to resent having to do all that work. Also, we realized that our production standards were vastly different. Greg is a perfectionist and I am not at all; that bred a lot of tension. It was necessary to end that project at the time. Many years later, we are excited by the possibility of collaborating again using the wisdom gained from our past experience.

MENTORSHIP

I want you to have a mentor *and* be a mentor. Compared to business and other sectors, mentorship is underutilized in the arts. This is due in part to the inflated sense of competition among artists promoted by capitalism, which perpetuates the lie that there aren't enough resources to go around. Mentorship is the opposite of the fearful hoarding of resources. It's the act of helping someone else's career by sharing your knowledge, relationships, advice, and professional support.

A mentor is simply someone with greater knowledge and experience who provides guidance and counsel. Doesn't that sound superb? Who doesn't need that? Mentorship can be formally established through schools, networks, and arts organizations. For example, the New York City arts organization [Queer | Art](#) funds an annual, application-based mentorship program comprised of a yearlong exchange between emerging and established artists. But many mentor/mentee relationships are informal, and the people involved don't use this specific word. When I ask my clients if they have mentors, they vaguely mumble a few names of people they might be willing to ask for advice, someday. I want something clearer and more formal for you. Get a mentor who knows they are, in fact, mentoring you.

To get a mentor, you first have to identify artists whose wisdom and guidance you want. Whose life and career do you admire? Then, you have to ask them. It helps if you already have a connection to the person, but that's not required. You can establish a relationship to an artist with the intent of asking them in the near future to mentor you. Some artists will say no; this is OK. It's not personal. Move on to the next person. Some artists might ask you what you specifically want from them as a mentor. Explain your wishes and expectations.

Why would somebody do this for you? Mentorship is an exchange; it's a relationship. Maybe they, too, have a mentor and want to pay it forward. Or they wish they'd had one. Some artists mentor other artists because they want their experiences and wisdom carried on. Some artists want to see underrepresented artists flourish and seek out mentees who share their backgrounds or identities. As we grow older, we accrue vast amounts of knowledge. Many brilliant people I know have never been asked to mentor anyone; they are sitting on volumes of insight and no one is asking them anything. They would be eager to share it with an interested person; you could be that person! Your mentor will get a lot out of the relationship, too. When we give away goodness from our surplus, we grow our internal abundance.

But you need to be a mentor, as well. Maybe that's with a youth artist, maybe another adult—totally your call. You don't need to wait. Wherever and whoever you are, right now, you have something to give another artist, so, to complete the mentorship loop, when you get yourself a mentor, find someone to be your protégé. Don't be creepy and nonconsensually tell someone younger how to live. (It doesn't work anyway.) A person should know you're mentoring them; they should agree to it! Offer yourself up as a mentor through community arts organizations or let people know through your various networks that you're willing and available to offer up your knowledge to another artist. You will be astounded to see how much wisdom you have to share!

ARTIST COMMUNITY

Way back in the introduction, I told you about my three pillars of a contented artist's life: a regular creative practice, taking in lots of art and experiences, and community. You must have a community of working artists who want good things for themselves and one another. You must create, deepen, and tend to these relationships with other artists. Artists need each other for everything from sharing their deepest pain to learning how to submit a grant application. A community of artists is a priceless resource. There are few problems in life that a community can't help you navigate.

My clients are very familiar with artist community assignments. I give them actual homework like regularly going to art events with another artist. Consider your current artist community. How many artists are in your life? How many online? How often do you spend time with or talk to other artists? How many of your close, intimate friendships are with other artists? Is it a homogeneous group? Do you have artist friends who challenge you to grow? Where do you see room for deepening and expansion?

Maybe you find that you're isolated with few or no artist friends. No problem. Let's start with how to find artists in your community. Volunteering or otherwise participating with an arts organization is one of the fastest ways to find other artists. Time with other people is key—that's how intimacy grows, from spending some time together. But, since you need to go out and experience lots of art anyway, you can accomplish two things at once by doing so with another artist. Since most people tend to feel a little isolated, you are doing a great favor to other artists when you

instigate any kind of social activity. Reciprocity is central. I think of a creative community as a giant ball of energy that each artist must contribute to and receive from.

An effective way to grow your artist community is by seeking out where there are gaps around you. What's missing that you want? Maybe create a free poetry-reading series, an artist-parent group, a critique night for women artists of color, queer filmmakers' screenings, or an application-submission accountability group for emerging artists. I can't say it often enough: It takes only three people to make anything happen. If you start something that you yourself want to go to, you'll find other artists in no time.

AUDIENCES

Think about all the art that you feel intimately connected to. For me, books, podcasts, and radio feel especially personal. In reality, I don't know the author whose memoir I've just finished but, while reading, I was granted entry into his life. I was allowed into his thoughts and experiences, which makes me feel deeply attached to him. As he wrote the memoir, he searched for private moments, shame, and even horror, willing to reproduce them for a readership, trusting we would find the book and wrap ourselves up in his story. This is a type of relationship.

You are in relationship with your audience, even if you never meet them. You are intimately connected to the work you create; audiences can feel deeply engaged with your art. They bring their whole lives, selves, and attention to your work—this is an offering on their part. It's a mutual, voluntary interchange that produces intimacy; let it drive positive, forward motion in your art. Think about your audiences, but don't try to crawl inside their minds, constraining yourself in fear of their response. Sometimes artists can get hung up on how they imagine someone will respond to the art they're still in the midst of creating; don't give the power to your fear about audience response. That's a *bad* relationship! You don't have to please them; you have to make your work. Some will like it, some will not. Your job is not to please your audience. Your job is to make your art and help it be in the world. There is a lid for every pot, and there is a person who loves every work created.

Artists can require different kinds of audience engagement. I find that artists who do any kind of performance require the vibrant energy that comes from live audiences, so we plan low-pressure opportunities for live performance at regular

intervals. Other artists, when they begin to feel lonely making a long project, benefit from the brief exchanges and support they receive after sharing something online. It helps keep them going for the duration of the work.

LINEAGE

Finally, you are in relationship to the artists who have come before you. Whether you know it or not, you come from long lines of artists connected through identity, politics, location, experience, aesthetic, movement, and materials. You must tend to these relationships: Learn about these artists, know their work, and challenge yourself to understand their context. When you conjure artists who've come before you, you'll never be alone. You can summon them through their work anytime you need this exact connectivity. Artistic lineage, just like a chosen family, is something you create. By placing yourself in the endless continuum of artists who came before you and who will come after you, you connect through space and time to your long, strange, magnificent lineage.



EDUCATION

CHAPTER EIGHT

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process.

—PAULO FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED*

UNDERSTANDING YOUR EDUCATIONAL PATH

Twenty-plus years after earning my bachelor's degree, I am still amazed that we are expected to decide, around seventeen or eighteen, whether we'll go to college and where. So much about the decision has already been shaped by our race, household income, location, and whether anyone in our families went to college before us, though we may not have known that when we were imagining ourselves in the landscape of higher education.

In 2001, I became the first person in my family to graduate from college. My street-smart father dropped out of high school to join the army, followed by a career in the car business. My bookish, brilliant mother graduated high school early because she was pregnant with my late older brother. He had tried a semester of college after barely finishing high school. Adept in math, a great football player, and mechanically inclined, my brother was, tragically, too drawn toward drugs and other escapes to leverage his natural gifts.

My freshman year of college, my mind was *blown* to learn that other kids went to private schools or something called “college prep schools.” I'd never heard of these; the Catholic school kids in my western Pennsylvania region were all dumped into my public school by ninth grade. Meeting my college peers, this was my first inkling that education wasn't equitable, and my choices had been shaped by forces much larger than me. A know-it-all white teenager, I thought I was completely in control of my destiny.

My haphazard decision-making surrounding undergraduate and graduate school used to embarrass me. I assumed my peers had powerful adult guidance helping them make hyper-informed choices while most of my knowledge about college came from '80s and '90s movies. (Would I suffer a panty raid? I wondered. Would Rodney Dangerfield wind up in my class?) My many years of client experience have demonstrated that I wasn't alone. A lot of us made post-high school choices based on limited information, little adult supervision, passing remarks, friends' recommendations, and, yes, unplanned happenstance. And for *all* of us, our educational choices are framed by race, household income, location, and whether anyone in our families went to college before us.

When I begin work with a new client, I ask questions that reveal the context of their educational journey to better understand how they've made decisions and what they think of these choices today. This information is an important component in understanding an artist as a holistic being, a life comprised of thousands of decisions, influences, perceived options, and coincidences. Making decisions about higher education in today's economic climate and job market requires considering your own educational journey thus far and your specific context.

How we make decisions about higher education (college, graduate degrees, trade and professional schools) is correlated to our families of origin: expectations, resources, modeling from previous generations, and the level of agency we have within our families while we're growing up. In this respect, my clients vary widely. Some artists had little to no guidance or support from adults in their family by the time they graduated high school and had to figure it out on their own. Others were told where they would go to school and what they would study, both of which were conditions for receiving financial, and in some cases emotional, support.

Think about your family history through the lens of education. Consider these questions through talking or writing:

- ✦ What is the education level and background of your siblings, parents, or other people who raised you? What about your grandparents and other family members in your life?
- ✦ What were the circumstances surrounding your choices after high school? What did you do and why? Who influenced your decisions and how?

- ♦ If you attended any schooling after high school, how was it paid for and why? Who talked to you about how it would be financed?
- ♦ How did you decide what you studied and why did you choose it?
- ♦ Considering your entire experience as a student, from childhood to adulthood, what is school like for you? How has your relationship to learning changed? How do you learn now?

TO MFA OR NOT TO MFA

“Should I get an MFA?” I receive this question *a lot*. Throughout my career, I’ve worked with artists across the formal education continuum. I have had clients who dropped out of high school, clients who earned PhDs, and everything between. Many earned MFAs while others have had no formal arts education. There are many intersecting circumstances that surround each artist’s decisions about undergraduate and graduate school. Earning an arts-focused degree is often a punch line in US culture; even when families and loved ones support the decision, an artist may feel they have to defend their choice throughout their lives to others and to themselves.

As of this writing, federal student loan debt, at \$1.5 trillion,⁵ is the second highest type of debt for Americans, just behind mortgage debt and higher than credit cards.⁶ Most of my clients who earned a bachelor of fine arts (BFA) and/or a master of fine arts (MFA) have significant student loan debt. Not all of them have debt. Some were fortunate to have families, spouses, or personal savings to pay for these degree programs, while others attended free MFA programs with the express purpose of not taking out loans during graduate school.

I dislike that talking to my clients about pursuing an MFA has become, first and foremost, a conversation about money. I believe everyone who wants it should be able to access higher education and graduate studies. Besides granting access to professional opportunities, an MFA program can be transformative for one’s practice. For many artists, their school experience will be the only time in their lives in which they are totally immersed in their art, with their practice as their sole focus. However, considering the climbing cost of living in major cities, which tend to be art hubs, combined with the continued rising costs of education, I think it’s unethical not to help my clients consider the economic impact on their lives.

OK, BUT SHOULD I DO IT?

I get it—you want answers! First, get very honest with yourself about why you want to pursue an MFA. This will require patience and diligence, but getting to the bottom of the choice can help inform where, when, and how this unfolds. Don't stop at "I've always wanted to!" Dig beneath that response so that you can be informed in making this decision.

Some reasons you want to get an MFA may include the following:

- ♦ I want to teach art to support myself as an artist
- ♦ The professional opportunities for my art career require having an MFA
- ♦ I'm not sure what to do next
- ♦ I want time in which I am completely devoted to my practice
- ♦ I need to expand my community of artists, make connections, and find mentors
- ♦ My practice (artistic voice, skill set, aesthetic) needs to be pushed in a rigorous environment
- ♦ There are specific artists I want to study with
- ♦ I have/don't have a BFA and this will be a corrective to that choice
- ♦ I want to become a famous/successful/financially self-supporting artist
- ♦ I want to live off loans for a little while and stop working so much

Add your motivations not listed here. Depending on your discipline, the programs you're considering, and your particular life context, everything I listed can be supported and debunked as reasons to pursue an MFA. For example, "I want to become a famous/successful/financially self-supporting artist"—while many economically and commercially successful artists have MFAs, others do not. Earning an MFA does not guarantee any commercial success. That said, MFA programs can help create the conditions that lead to it.

Identify a few artists in your discipline whose careers you admire. Find those who both did and did not earn an MFA; bonus points for finding artists who attended the programs you're considering. If you know or have access to the artists on your list, contact them to ask about their experience: What do they regret, why are they satisfied with their educational choices, and what advice can they offer surrounding MFA programs and career building. If you have zero access to the person, look up every interview they've ever conducted, or any writing they have on the subject. Then talk to the artists who didn't get an MFA (and maybe a few who didn't get any formal arts education) and ask them questions, too.

Next, get really honest about the financial impact on your life. Is there anyone who will pay or help pay for your education? Have you researched grants or scholarships available to you or within the programs you're interested in? If you will need to take out loans, can you find a way to lessen the amount you borrow by working before and possibly during school? Have you identified all the free MFA programs in your field? There are programs throughout the United States in every artistic discipline that are free, or come with tuition waivers, or that even provide stipends to support the artists' cost of living.

Why do I keep harping on the cost when I, myself, am someone who earned a bachelor's in English and a master's in counseling psychology to the tune of \$90,000 in student loans? Because if you're pursuing an artistic practice, it's entirely possible that you will not make much money from your art, especially early in your career. You may, in fact, never make money from it, and that is OK—you're still an artist and you still have to make your work. My clients who have a lot of student loan debt struggle with their monthly loan payment while also making time for their art and building their art career. Even those who are not paying back their loans currently (due to forbearance, deferment, or default) are bogged down with the psychological pressure of the loan amount. Some artists cannot speak or write the number of their student loan debt because it induces severe anxiety. Though we humans tend to learn from our own mistakes and choices rather than ones spelled out for us, I hope you will consider your specific context to figure out how to make the best educational choices for your life and your art.

I often go to Instagram to ask questions of my many followers who are artists about their lives. I collected the following responses to this prompt: *Did you get a BFA and/or MFA? Why or why not? What do you make of the choices today?*

- ✦ Did not. Had a chip on my shoulder about not going, but currently relieved to not have that stinky mountain of debt.
- ✦ Got a BFA and honestly it was a waste of money. If I had been more confident when younger to just work and make my art, I think I'd be making way more art today.
- ✦ No. It seemed expensive and not practical. I only wanted to spend money on college for something that I thought would pay me, and art has never felt like that. I wish I was more educated about art history, theory, and critical thinking, BUT having no school debt has enabled me to put my art first without having to have a high-pressure job.
- ✦ I went to school for a BFA and dropped out my senior year. I was pregnant and battling depression and addiction. I regret not going back to finish because I was so close, but I wouldn't change my life as it is. I enjoyed studying art and being in a collective with other artists. I think not having a BFA doesn't affect my work as an artist, but it does affect my ability to get jobs in general and pursue a master's, even in other areas of study. They do not teach BFA students how to be a working artist, and I think that is a damn shame, and something I still work at.
- ✦ I got an MFA. Even though I have student loans I still consider it valuable because I came away with an incredible mentor. If I could do it again, I'd spend more time building community with other writers and consider waiting another year and reapplying to programs to see if I could get better funding. I get annoyed when people dismiss MFA programs as a whole because writers need a lot of support!
- ✦ I got a BFA because in my family it was encouraged/assumed that I would go to college, and I wanted to go to art school. When I think about it now, six years later, I don't regret it, but I also wish I had thought more about my future finances about school. Rarely does anyone care I have a BFA when I am getting jobs/work. I feel like some classes were wonderful for me but often it was just being in the

“soup” of people/a creative scene that was what I took away. Other students telling me what books they were reading, going to concerts and shows. I wish there had been a class on invoicing, on how valuable your skill is, and you shouldn’t work for free, etc. There was no business class art world primer. I had to figure out a lot of that stuff on my own/ through peers.

- ♦ Both (MFA and BFA). I waited as long as possible to go to grad school but got to the point where I was just barely losing out in grants to people who had MFAs, maybe because of the resume line, maybe because they had had concentrated time to improve their work. Grad school was the single most difficult and lonely experience of my adult life, but I’m still glad I did it because it broadened my thinking and made my work better, made me tougher. But two years after graduating I’m only starting to recover and I feel the desperate need to take a step back and rehabilitate my relationship with my creativity, nurture it again with no motivation other than pleasure for myself in the process of making things.
- ♦ I did both (MFA and BFA). I chose to for the pure love of learning, and because I was an older student coming from the dot-com world, I had the money and deep desire to start from the ground up. (Meaning, I could have opted for only an MFA, but went back for a second undergrad degree first.) I wanted to miss nothing! I wanted the full experience.
- ♦ I got a BFA in acting! I wanted to get one in musical theater initially, but I’m happy I ended up going the acting route. And I love my major. Four years of studying great plays, my body as my instrument, and deepening my understanding of self. The perfect segue into adulthood and therapy!
- ♦ I have both (MFA and BFA). I regret the debt but not the rigor and commitment that my MFA taught me. The debt keeps me from being a

full-time artist, but my work (both in my job and my creative work) are better thanks to graduate study.

- ♦ BFA right after high school. I just wanted to go to art school and be an artist. Graduated in 2006 and worked retail since. Painting and taking commissions on the side. I don't regret my education but wish I had a path laid out. Practical advice, etc.
- ♦ I got both a BFA and an MFA by the age of twenty-five. In most jobs, my co-workers either have no degree or studied something completely different than film. I got mine because I wanted to make films. I regret my decision to get my MFA so early and be in so much debt, but I also know I met some amazing people in school and was able to make many connections in my field.

OTHER OPTIONS

When I lived in San Francisco, I attended a 12-step meeting called Y.A.H.O.O., which stood for You Always Have Other Options. This refrain saves me from a lot of thought traps my brain gets me into. Remembering that we have choices is a balm for a fiery hell-brain. You have lots of options for continued learning and developing as an artist, including formal arts education. You also have options as to *when* you take the next steps.

The Brooklyn arts organization Pioneer Works held an Alternative Art School Fair in 2016, which brought together alternative art schools nationally and internationally to consider the many different structures this could take.⁷ There are dozens and dozens of established and emerging art school alternatives, both formalized and unofficial. A swell of DIY arts education exists throughout the country, and there are many resources for developing your own course of study from what is available online.

Due to complicated family circumstances when she was in high school, my client Soo-Jin, who is Korean American, was unable to access federal student loans, and many years later, she longed to go to art school to support her visual practice. But by now, she is a disciplined artist who supplements her self-taught studio practice with leveraging everything available to her in New York City, where she lives. Absorbing

information through books, lectures, exhibitions, openings, artist talks, and thousands of other arts activities available throughout the city, Soo-Jin realized she could learn on her own without the significant debt. An organized leader, she solicited other artists who wanted an MFA experience and created a small cohort in peer-led education. They create their own syllabi with advice from other artists; they keep one another on track. Soo-Jin may still seek a formal MFA, but in the meantime, she's committed to her practice and her self-directed arts education.

WHAT IF I ALREADY HAVE AN MFA?

Wonderful! Consider how your MFA program introduced you to people, ideas, and parts of yourself that you otherwise may never have encountered. Are you fully leveraging the experience socially, financially, artistically, and professionally? Who did you meet that you want to reconnect with? Could you earn increased wages or additional income streams because you have this degree? Are you taking advantage of any alumni networks, formal and informal? What books and art were you introduced to but didn't have time to dig into? Now could be the time. How can you show gratitude for your MFA by leveraging it to support your practice?

If it's hard for you to have gratitude for your art school experience, know that its impact on your life and your future may not be clear yet and that more will be revealed. For a while after graduate school, I felt bad about the debt I had accrued to earn a master's degree. I often scolded myself, "You're not even using it. It was a waste." But it turns out, I just wasn't using it professionally *yet*; it would be a few years before I imagined my arts consulting business, which relies completely on my counseling background. Regardless of feeling regret about the economic impact of my graduate degree in my life during those years, I knew that I was a better, wiser, and more compassionate person from having earned my counseling psychology degree. You are still becoming the artist that your education and experiences helped shape; we are all always in the process of becoming.

5. "Federal Student Loan Portfolio," Federal Student Aid,
<https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/about/data-center/student/portfolio>.

6. Zach Friedman, “Student Loan Debt Statistics in 2018: A \$1.5 Trillion Crisis,” *Forbes*, June 13, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackfriedman/2018/06/13/student-loan-debt-statistics-2018/#7095984f7310>.

7. “Alternative Art School Fair,” Pioneer Works, November 2016, <https://pioneerworks.org/programs/alternative-art-school-fair/#schools>.



THINKING

+

FEELING

CHAPTER NINE

We love so much the idea of the struggling artist that we enfranchise not the artist, but the struggle. In fact, we insist on it.

—TONI MORRISON, “THE INDIVIDUAL ARTIST”

I was surprised to find myself moved by a bumper sticker. Believing my depth and sophistication level are deep and high, respectively, I assumed a quip on the back of someone’s car couldn’t stir something inside of me. But I found myself tailing a Toyota when I noticed the bumper sticker on the back that read: Don’t Believe Everything You Think. Out loud I uttered an earnest “Hmm,” and wondered if something cosmic had plunked this slow-ass driver ahead of me. The message reads a few possible ways, but the one I took away is the directive not to attach meaning or truth to every passing thought.

This reminded me of the advice my friend, the writer Michelle Tea, would give to anyone in the midst of terrible PMS. “Don’t believe the thoughts,” she’d implore. When thinking grows toxic, due to hormones, fatigue, illness, depression, systemic injustice, social media, or any number of confounding variables, it’s important to hold thoughts lightly. Detaching from our thinking is a life-changing skill. We are not our thoughts. Most thoughts are not true. Not all our thoughts need close consideration. Most do not need to be acted upon. We can hone our judgment to differentiate among the thoughts, which to trust and act on, and which to discard.

Our thought patterns create emotional landscapes that contribute to and inhibit behavior. If you think something terrible about yourself, you will tend to feel bad, which naturally affects how you act, what you do, and what you don’t do. If you think something will be difficult or uncomfortable, you may feel dread, which can then produce avoidance. If you think someone is talking about you, you may feel paranoid and exposed, which could make you self-conscious in your actions. This is the basis of cognitive behavior therapy—but you don’t need a deep understanding of this psychological framework to recognize how thinking shapes your experiences. The challenge is that these thoughts happen rapidly and repeatedly, without our noticing.

THINKING

Artists necessarily spend a lot of time in their own minds. Making your work means dropping deep inside your head in order to imagine, conjure, visualize, think through problems, and make connections. But, at times, our minds can be a troubling or even frightening place to dwell. The deep thinking that artists require can lead to cognitive traps that are difficult to escape. You may even think yourself out of making your art. How do we spend time in our beautiful, labyrinthine minds without becoming stuck there?

Learning that we are not our thoughts, that our thinking isn't an accurate narration of the world around us, other people, and ourselves, is liberating. Our minds hum endlessly with thoughts. Go ahead—pay attention to what's going on in your mind right now. You may be judging me, or yourself, or someone sitting near you. Maybe you are thinking of what you need to do when you're done reading, or some other, unrelated thoughts might surface. There may be racing or overlapping thoughts, making it hard to differentiate among them. Thoughts are just the mind's output, the brain doing what it does—it thinks *a lot*.

Across cultures, there are many modalities that teach a person to notice their thoughts, and detach from and slow their thinking: the aforementioned cognitive behavioral therapy, meditation, prayer, mindfulness, Buddhism, chanting, body-based practices, and 12-step programs, for example. As we begin to notice our thoughts, we can detach them from meaning, question their validity, and decide what to do with them. This experience, over time, can result in decreased anxiety, increased peacefulness on the inside, and more well-being.

Noticing our thinking is a skill that we build. We're not born knowing how to do this. Millions of thoughts fly about our minds: We are conscious of some of them, many stick out, others take place in our dreamscape, some are repetitive, most are fleeting. The more anxious we are, the faster and more chaotic the thinking can seem. Slowing down our minds using a tool such as meditation doesn't result in emptying the brain of thoughts but instead allows us to just notice them. We can have entrenched thought patterns for decades that go unnoticed because they seem like the structural material of the self and the world around us, yet those, too, are just thoughts. And thoughts are often untrue.

THE STORY

Our thinking builds a narrative about ourselves, about everyone we encounter, and about the world around us. Examining and poking holes in this narration lets us question whether it's true, or was ever true, and where there is more to it than we're acknowledging. These stories are constructed by input from the outside world and processed through our individual filters, shaped by our lifetime of experiences. Our internal and external worlds contribute to these beliefs, and everything can be up for reconsideration.

We have a story about who we are and what we are like. We not only believe it, but we also may operate as if it's an unmovable truth, the stuff of the universe. It's unchangeable. Sometimes the narrative has been handed to us, meaning we *must* question it. Recently, I had a phone conversation with my father in which I told him about a significant professional deadline. My father and I do not have a close relationship. I haven't lived with him since I was thirteen, and we've had periods of near estrangement. In my adult life, I speak to him about once or twice a month. We see each other every few years, usually for funerals. But I am his only daughter, he's known me my entire life, and he has thoughts about who I am, which become, for him, an uncontested truth. He reacted with surprise as I described my progress, explaining that I would finish the project early, in advance of the deadline. He responded that I've always been a procrastinator and that it was unusual for me to finish something early.

It was a strange comment, unrecognizable to anyone who has ever met me in the past twenty years. Habitually, embarrassingly early, highly disciplined, and anxious about any type of lateness, I rarely, if ever, procrastinate, especially when it comes to work. But for my father, his understanding of me draws from fleeting memories of a teenage girl who was probably avoiding her geometry homework or a college student pulling an all-nighter during finals week. He became stuck in a particular version of who he believed I was and has limited capacity for that to grow and change. Procrastination is not something I identify with as an adult, but I probably did procrastinate long ago. Some stories we internalize when we are young and then, as adults, we need to reevaluate them.

My father thinking of me as a procrastinator is an easy narrative for me to dismiss because it's so far from my lived experience and it is not reflected back at me by anyone else. But there are millions of *other* stories that are more difficult to interrogate: those deep inside us, which other people hold up as unmovable truth,

that we don't recognize as subjective because they look like fact. These stories, the ones that are harder to dismiss, get revealed through the habitual noticing of our thoughts and curiosity about their origins.

Then there are the narratives about who we are that are constructed by the culture around us. We have a lifetime of ideas projected on to us based on our intersecting identities and experiences—gender, age, ethnicity, disabilities, class background, religion, race, education level, family structure, appearance, geographic location, and more. Bombarded with messaging, we naturally internalize these, too, and eventually we must identify and reexamine them.

My clients have all kinds of beliefs about themselves that we have to reconsider and poke around in. The tropes include *I'm selfish*, *I'm a mess*, *I'm bad with money*, *I am a black sheep*, *I'm a bad* [insert family role], *I'm not* [insert identity] *enough*, *I can't take care of myself*, *I'm always late*, and *I have no discipline*. Once we identify some thought patterns and stories, I like to hold them up for interrogation with the artist, challenge them, find out where they come from, and question their validity. Some of the internal narration is cognitive distortion, thought patterns that are inaccurate but that we believe to be true and use to inform our actions. Other stories have some truth and so we begin to build behavior changes.

Again, all of this “thinking” work is important for artists because there are thought patterns that likely constrain or negatively impact your art practice. For example, what stories do you tell yourself about *what* you make, *how* you work, and *what you need* to make your work? Back to the writer Michelle Tea's infinite wisdom: “Do not believe your own superstitions of what you think you need in order to write.” What you think you need in order to make your work can sometimes be a cover-up for a block caused by inflexibility. Do I want you to be disciplined with your art practice? Yes. Do I want this discipline to verge on superstitious perfectionism, thereby narrowing the wheres and hows of your work? No way.

Your mind does immeasurable work for you. It can produce complicated, inventive, and deeply profound art, but it cannot reflect you and your work back at you accurately. Which is so weird! Your mind makes the art but then can't tell you the truth about it. But it happens—I have hundreds of artists in my life who make art that inspires me every day and their brains tell them it's trash. Can't trust that thinking.

So how do you decide which thoughts to use and which to discard? How do we know and trust ourselves while not holding on to our thoughts? Where is the boundary between intuition and toxic thought?

THE FIRST THOUGHT

Documentary filmmaker Sophie Huber's *Blue Note Records: Beyond the Notes* traces the history of the pioneering jazz label, the ground-breaking musicians who advanced the form, and how the label gave them freedom to do so. In the film, jazz pianist Herbie Hancock describes a profound lesson he took from Miles Davis during the era that he played in the Miles Davis Quintet. Hancock recounts a particular piano improvisation one night during which he played a bad chord, a just plain *wrong* sound, which sent him into a shame spiral that he'd just ruined the moment in this big show. Miles Davis, Hancock remembers, listened to the "bad chord" and responded purposefully on his trumpet, altering the moment into something musically transcendent. The shift for Hancock meant that the bad chord could become right and he hadn't ruined anything. He credits Davis in that instance for teaching him a divine lesson about self-judgment. Even jazz legends have self-doubt.

It is said that we are not responsible for our first thought. We are responsible for our second thought and our first action. That's because our initial thought in any moment, responding to any particular stimuli, may just be utter nonsense, a thought meant for the cognitive garbage bin. Our first thought could be steeped in fear, judgment, old thought patterns, and stories; perhaps it's distinctly someone else's voice—an ex, a family member, an authority figure from long ago. We're not responsible for that first bullshit thought. We are responsible for our next thought, the second thought, which we consciously conjure in response to that first thought. Then, we're responsible for our first action.

A helpful exercise I develop with artists is the practice of noticing their first thought in response to a situation or stimuli. I ask them to speak the initial thought out loud in order to clearly identify it. Next, they *respond* to the first thought consciously and carefully. Often, the second thought refutes, questions, or soothes the first thought. (For example: *I'm a bad artist*. This could be followed by a softer,

Maybe I'm not so bad.) Then, they take a pause to ask themselves if there is action to take. The action could be deliberately continuing their creative work even though their first thought was that the art is bad.

This cognitive training, like so many other life-changing skills, seems small and perhaps too simple. In reality, this is a very difficult practice but one that becomes habit and actually transforms our thinking. All of it—this first-thought, second-thought, first-action practice—takes place in brief moments. Think of this habit as an inch wide but a mile deep. Over time and with practice, we can actually reroute our thoughts, replacing old thinking with new cognitive patterns. Changing up our thinking has a huge impact on our feelings and behavior.

ALL THE FEELS

Have you ever read one of those lists of feelings? Do a quick online search for “feelings list” and you’ll find a variety of them. Dispensed in therapists’ offices and communication workshops among other places, these lists are useful because our emotional vocabulary can be limited. In fact, our range of emotions can be stunted, too, and it’s helpful to know all the kinds of emotions humans can and do have. There are *so many feelings* and there is power in naming them. Check out one of these lists and notice which feelings are available to you and which seem unusual or unknown in your emotional range.

Feelings get a bad rap in the dominant culture. Emotionality gets mocked and pathologized. Feelings are framed as feminine and anything labeled feminine is routinely dismissed and devalued. We learn that emotions are things to ignore, deny, or vanquish. We may be told for a long time that our feelings are wrong, bad, too big, overwhelming for others, are not real, or are an indication that we’re crazy. When we are messaged over and over that there is something wrong with our feelings, we may suppress or mistrust them.

You’ll note that throughout this book I frequently write about something being neither good nor bad. This applies to feelings, too. No feeling you have is bad, it just *is*. We have to feel our feelings, even the uncomfortable ones. There isn’t a permanent way around them; we can only move through them. As with our thoughts, when we learn to identify our feelings, our power over them can grow. Also like our thoughts, our feelings are real but they’re not all necessarily true. And no feeling is final. All feelings, like everything else, will pass and change.

For many of us, there are categories of feelings that are easy to feel and others that are difficult to access or that tend to be delayed. Our psyches deal with difficult or unwanted emotions through a number of different strategies, some helpful, others more harmful. For example, many people learn that anger isn't allowed, that it's an inappropriate emotion to express, or—because of their race or gender, perhaps—that there are serious consequences for expressing it. So anger may get somaticized (converted into something physical), displaced (feelings redirected to a more acceptable target), suppressed or denied, projected (identifying someone else as having your feeling), sublimated (turned into a socially acceptable or productive action), or processed by a number of other psychological defense strategies.

FEELINGS AS FODDER

Emotions are *powerful* and feelings can be *big*. Artists know this because they often have increased emotional availability and emotional intelligence. As feelings come along with thoughts, they can produce and inhibit all kinds of behavior. Think about some of your strongest emotions and what kinds of behaviors you connect directly back to them. (Take another look at that feelings list if you need a reminder of the wide world of feelings and how to name them.) Let's consider a few interesting emotions that may conjure clear memories:

- ♦ When did you last feel awed? What was happening? What did you do with the emotion or as a result of feeling awed?
- ♦ What was a time that you felt humiliated? What happened to cause the feeling and what behavior or action do you connect to it?
- ♦ How about a time recently that you felt resentful? What was your resentment and where was it directed? How did you behave in relation to this resentment?
- ♦ When and why have you felt grateful? What surrounded the gratitude? How did you act when you felt grateful?

Feelings are valuable tools and an important motivation for artists who often use the psychological strategy of sublimation in their art making. In fact, I see sublimation as one of the key psychological tools in artists' lives. As an artist feels something—enraged, hopeless, grief-stricken, pensive, or euphoric, for example—they may turn

the feelings into creative work. The feelings may be the motivation to get into a project. This is a healthy, productive iteration of sublimation, taking an emotion and using it to make something. This sublimated-emotion-as-art is, as I've mentioned, a generous offering to audiences. We, as the audience, can often experience the emotion the artist has sublimated into art (see [chapter 6](#), Grief, for many examples). Many emotions are conveyed to us through artwork. We can expand our range of emotions through experiencing art.

BUT MY FEELINGS!

Again, feelings aren't facts. They can be big, even overwhelming, and they are real. But they aren't necessarily true. I might feel afraid, but it doesn't mean that I am in danger. (This is essential for white people to learn!) This means that, like thoughts, we have to identify and accept our feelings, but not each one requires rumination, believing, or action. But, again, they must be felt, which seems contradictory. We have internal experiences, which we call feelings, and the urge may be to dismiss or avoid them. Even though they may not be grounded in truth, they are real and come from very real places within us and must be validated and experienced. The tricky business is learning to identify, feel, and trust our range of emotions without succumbing to each one.

Return to that list of feelings again with your art practice in mind. What kinds of feelings show up in your work? Which emotions serve as motivation for you to make your art? Do any feelings discourage you from art making? Which do you sublimate, turning a feeling into a productive action? Maybe there are some feelings you'd like to explore, and your creative practice could be the conduit. Or some emotion you are avoiding that could surface with the help of your work.

ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

Back to bumper stickers. You know the one that says "If You're Not Outraged, You're Not Paying Attention"? Now, it could be "If You're Not Anxious and Depressed, You're Not Paying Attention." The twins of late capitalism—anxiety and depression—are ubiquitous in my clients. Some of them have diagnosable mood disorders that require and respond to treatment (therapy, medication, a variety of lifestyle adaptations), but nearly everyone experiences anxiety, depression, or both at different points.

It is be hard to be human. The world pummels and amazes us, sometimes in a single day. Living with anxiety or depression (or both) is very common, whether it's something that runs in your family, a response to your environment, or the natural outcome of life in the twenty-first century. I want you to think about any symptoms of anxiety and depression that you notice in your life. Maybe you have experiences that fall under this terminology, but you haven't identified them as such. This happens all the time. An artist will tell me a variety of experiences and symptoms, and I will tell them, "It sounds like you are experiencing [anxiety/depression]" and they practically smack their foreheads with a resounding, "Oh, is *that* all?"

Noticing the times and ways we are anxious and depressed helps us be in charge of our own lives. We can learn to navigate and live with anxiety and depression when we know that this is what's going on. There is help in many different healing modalities to treat and lessen the effects. Naturally, I want you to use your art practice as one way you navigate symptoms and effects of anxiety and depression.

AND ACTION!

Those thoughts and feelings we've identified and reviewed all lead up to behavior (including inaction). This is the crux of it all because what you do and don't do impacts *everything*. If we want something new or different, we have to take action in that direction. Understanding and knowing ourselves, our thoughts and feelings, is just the first part—but we cannot stop there. Behavior is what leads to behavior change. We have to take action.

I am obsessed with contrary action, the behavioral choices we make in response to those thoughts and feelings that suggest giving up, hating ourselves, living in fear, withdrawing into isolation, making ourselves small, comparing our insides to someone else's outsides, stewing in misery, or any other stifled ways of living. Contrary action can be any size. A tiny movement can unblock a lifelong cognitive distortion.

As you identify thought patterns that you want to disrupt and feelings that you want to work through, taking a contrary action can be an effective tool for personal growth. What thoughts do you want to counter with contrary action? Which feelings do you want to move through by using some new or different behavior? An easy way into this exercise is this: List a few actions you want to take where a critical inner voice has stopped you short. A contrary action is to do the thing anyway.

Taking better care of yourself is an action I hope you'll take today and every day. It's a terrible, destructive myth that artists create better work through suffering. There are too many examples we can point to where sick and suffering artists are valorized for their addictions, self-harming behavior, or suicide. Again, artists make their work not because they are in pain but because they are artists and that's how they respond to everything around them, including pain. When artists take better care of themselves and stabilize mental health issues, it becomes easier for them to maintain a regular practice and their output grows exponentially. We are robbed of an artist's life and gifts when that person gives up on creating art, becomes immobilized, or dies by suicide or overdose. We must take care of ourselves and each other.



ISOLATION

CHAPTER TEN

Everyone needs solitude, especially a person who is used to thinking about what she experiences. Solitude is very important in my work as a mode of inspiration, but isolation is not good in this respect. I am not writing poetry about isolation.

—WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA

Texting with a beloved friend who is a writer, I told her that I was thinking about isolation, that the subject would be its own chapter in this book. She immediately responded, “I’ll skip right to that chapter when it comes out.” She, like many of my artist friends, struggles with isolation and how to get out from beneath it. Because she has to spend a lot of time alone writing, both for money and for her own projects, isolation is a job hazard. She works at home, in her downtown Los Angeles loft apartment. She can easily pass several days without seeing another human being. Once she knows that she’s been isolating and it’s no longer just about the writing, she’s already been alone, out of her mind, for days, and she finds it impossible to reconnect. Getting her to leave the apartment requires superhuman strength, unyielding patience, and formidable bait.

Isolation can seem like it’s happening to us, that we are powerless until it passes, like the flu or a thunderstorm. Artists describe it as a condition that comes over them; at first, they think it’s something else: fatigue, bad weather, a slight cough. Before long, they discover that the call is coming from *inside the house*; they are isolating themselves, and they don’t know how to stop. Waiting it out like an illness, however, without taking any steps to lessen it, can lengthen the isolation and worsen its harmful effects.

This reminds me of a meme (I swear this will be the only time I reference a meme) that comprises two side-by-side photos of a child’s head on the ground. On the left side, the child cries out in pain as a large rubber boot steps down on his head. On

the right side, zooming out, we see the child laughing because it's his arm inside of the boot, pressing down. And so it is with isolation, sometimes. With our left hand, we dig ourselves out from under a pile that our right hand continues to build.

Because it's so common, I contemplate and often discuss isolation with my clients. I look out for artists who are in the midst of the more harmful effects of isolation. To gauge this, I barrage my clients with questions about their family, friendships, community, how much or little time they spend with other people, and the quality of such time. Asking someone if they are isolated can be imprecise, however, because we have so many words that gesture toward the qualities of aloneness: *isolation*, *solitude*, *loneliness*, *seclusion*, *privacy*, *downtime*, and *introversion*. "I'm a Scorpio" is another example. I need to be sure we are talking about the same thing.

When I need specificity in my thinking and communicating, I return to the Oxford English Dictionary, like I am my own, internal high school teacher forever instructing "look it up." The Los Angeles Public Library has a dizzying number of free services for cardholders and one perk is access to the OED online. (Long live libraries! Thank a librarian today!) The first entry for *isolation* in the OED reads:

The fact or condition of being isolated or standing alone; separation from other things or persons; solitariness.

Standing alone, separated. I'll get back to this.

I am firmly a member of Generation Catalano, the term used in a *Slate* piece by writer Doree Shafrir⁸ to describe those of us born in the cuspy years between Generation X and millennials. I've been accused of overidentifying with this generation, but truthfully, it captures my deep sense of self even more than being a Capricorn, a lesbian, a feminist, or any of the other labels that profoundly reflect my experience. Anyway, being a member of Generation Catalano, I watched a ton of *Absolutely Fabulous* in my tween years; it was somehow on Comedy Central every time I turned on the television. I still re-watch a lot, so the word *isolation* instantly conjures the episode "Iso Tank" in which Edina falls asleep in her new isolation tank after Patsy accidentally knocks the lid closed. Absurd hijinks ensue, which are revealed at the episode's end to be just a dream sequence while Edina was snoozing in total sensory deprivation.

I tell you this to contextualize why, as I began reflecting on isolation, my first instinct was to book an appointment at a Pasadena “float spa,” a sensory deprivation pod where I bobbed in eighteen inches of highly salinized water. Silent and completely dark, I figured an hour of this float therapy would yield some insight into isolation. The float spa recommended counting down from a hundred over and over if I got bored or anxious during the hour.

The experience was genuinely relaxing. I melted into a meditative, nap-like state. I wasn’t exactly asleep, but I lost time as if I were, waking when some part of my body twitched. The zero gravity of the salted water was a relief for my aging, laptop-afflicted body. Living in a major city with two barky, reactive dogs, next door to young children, silence is not easily come by, so I found the noiseless dark surprising at first. I hadn’t heard only my breath since . . . maybe I never had?

Throughout my conscious moments of isolated floating, I was acutely aware that, had I tried this ten years ago, I would’ve had a very different experience. It’s taken decades of work on myself to crave aloneness, motivated by a desire to be with just myself. I spent my teen years and twenties continuously with friends or roommates, or with a cordless phone—later a flip phone—glued to my ear. I was twenty-seven when I lived alone for the first time. That younger person would have surely avoided an hour alone with herself and her thoughts. Some of this is due to my extroversion; my nature is such that I get energy from being around other people, though I find this shifting as I grow older. Much of it was a fear of being in my mind, alone with myself for longer than a minute. Now, look at me! I seek out *and pay for* an hour of nude, sensory deprivation.

Here’s the gem that hour of salty silence revealed: a thoughtful meditation on the nature of both isolation and solitude. The word *solitude* appeared in my mind, as if on a dimmer switch, lighting up and receding, over and over. It seemed to me that understanding the distinction between these two experiences is key to unpacking what can help the artist and what can harm. When I returned home from my isolation float experience, I looked up *solitude* in the OED and I found this: *The state of being or living alone.*

That sounds rather serene.

The Nobel Prize-winning poet Wisława Szymborska helpfully differentiated between isolation and solitude in the quote heading this chapter. Paralleling what I found in the OED, her distinction points to isolation as a separating action, while

solitude neutrally reads as a state of being. Isolation and solitude are quite different, and, I argue, do not necessarily coexist. As one grows, the other retreats. Creating the conditions for one reduces the other.

I frame isolation as a kind of a moving away from-ness. It has a defensive quality, an active withdrawing from outside influences and other people. Isolating oneself builds up metaphorical walls to keep the outside world away as a means of self-induced removal. Solitude, on the other hand, evokes a moving toward-ness, an intentional gravitation to a deeper interior self that is reached specifically through these means. Solitude actively seeks the fullness of an internal universe that the outside world cannot penetrate. Isolation caves inward in a pained, depressive, noisy silence while solitude grins happily to itself, gratefully relishing the celebratory quiet.

Performance artist and comedian Jibz Cameron explains her experience with isolation this way:

“Isolation” is one of my favorite Joy Division songs, and similar to Ian Curtis, I feel it is a gift to be alone with my thoughts as well as a curse from the depths of hell. Isolation for me is related to my social anxiety—I isolate from social life, fun, creativity, and all kinds of things that are good for me. Social isolation comes from the fear that I will be somehow sucked dry by some outside entity—people, society, driving, some event—or that I don’t have any energy to be interesting in the world, and, therefore, will come across to people in a way that I don’t want to. Sometimes it is very good to avoid certain social events (festivals of any kind, for example, or food truck events), but if I do some deep inner questioning around my urge to isolate, I can usually find the truth in its reasoning. Sometimes I simply need to recharge. Most often, however, I am acting out of fear of something I have no control over. I want to feel safe and isolation is a place that is very comfortable for me. But it also robs me of life, of love, of newness and the chance to meet celebrities and find out how short they are or get a free vegan ice cream sample.

As Jibz suggests, motivation is a potent indicator of the sort of aloneness one is experiencing. *Isolation* and *solitude*, for example, can each have a different impetus, as do other words signifying aloneness—*loneliness*, *seclusion*, *privacy*, *reclusiveness*, *introversion*, and being a Scorpio. Therefore, when clients bring up their experiences with aloneness, regardless of the word they use to characterize it, I ask them about

the conditions of and desire for the aloneness. This illuminates where they are on the continuum of aloneness—generative and fulfilling at one end, depressing and overwhelming at the other. If I ask them why they are spending a lot of time alone and they answer, “I’m deep in my head these days, thinking about my next project,” I’m not concerned. If they respond, “I’m feeling depressed and it’s hard to make plans with anyone and I don’t really have friends anyway,” then I know we need an action plan.

Why is this so important? Because most artists spend a great deal of time alone. Maybe it’s the nature of their practice, it’s how they develop ideas, or they are introverted people who need to be alone in order to recoup energy. A lot of art is created in isolation: music, writing of all kinds, painting, choreography, video and film (lonely is the editing process, and with much sitting!)—truly, any kind of creative work can require the artist to be alone at some point, possibly for long stretches. Some artists have to spend a ton of time alone to get the work done; when their creative work is bound up in their income stream, it feels even more like a trap. If they have to be alone a lot to make the work and earn a living, how do they build the tools to reenter the land of the living after work? How to counter the isolation required of a job?

THE LINE

The alone time, whatever the reason behind it, may start innocuously enough. You’re sick in bed. A snowstorm keeps you home. You thoughtfully planned a staycation with your paid time off. A three-day holiday weekend comes around. You cordon off a solo writing retreat somewhere secluded. You work from home. Coming off a super busy period, you lie low for a couple of days. What starts out as neutral or even constructive aloneness becomes confusing; at a point it crosses a line from generative or relaxing to depressing. Your task is to identify that line. What are the signals that you are crossing it?

The challenge is that isolation can act as a toxic mold; it regenerates and spreads, making it difficult to eliminate. When the aloneness crosses over into the harmful effects of isolation, this is when artists are most at risk of believing the noxious sludge spewing out of their brains. There is so much muck in there, for all of us! Fear and venomous thoughts are well-trodden subjects in other chapters, but here I want

to remind you that *you are not your thoughts*, that it takes practice to notice and detach from one's thinking, and that thoughts generate feelings, which can produce and inhibit behavior.

How do you identify that line and whether you've crossed it? How do you characterize the nature of your aloneness? To begin, be radically honest with yourself about the motivation behind your daily choices that are sustaining the aloneness. Why are you not responding to calls and texts? Why are you turning down plans or reluctant to initiate some? Why do you want or need to be alone right now, truly? Then, consider the quality of the aloneness. What is your mood and how are your hygiene habits? How depressed do you feel? How content do you feel? How are you experiencing the alone time and how are you using it? Finally, think about what follows the aloneness. Do you have imminent plans to be among humans again as this period draws to its natural close? Or does it seem more like a colossal black hole that you are sucked into?

LONESOME LIKES

Picture it. Alone with your phone, probably in bed, with dozens of friends, hundreds of acquaintances, and thousands of online kinfolk at your fingertips. You scroll through any and every social media platform, absorbing the thoughts, jokes, meals, vacations, successes, brief music videos, outrages, and occasional cries for help from hundreds or thousands of people, anyone from your best friend to a total stranger whom you no longer remember why you follow. You post something cute or funny for a little attention, a moment of connection. A hand waving, *I'm here*. Everyone is probably together having fun or doing something cool or being very successful, you imagine. *Without me*, you punctuate. You notice, with a jolt, that you've been in this social media scroll-hole for ninety minutes. Feeling terrible, overwhelmed, and wondering why no one has called or texted you in that time and with just four strangers' likes on your post, you sink deeper into bed and switch to a different social media app, trying to both kill and feed the bad feelings.

Maybe I've just described most days for you, maybe just the occasional bad Internet vortex. The point is that this is a familiar scenario to most people in this, our glorious digital age of worldwide connection. How often do I see an acquaintance out at an event and try desperately to recall if I've run into them recently or just seen them on the Internet? How irritated do I feel when somebody

has not answered my phone call or email (or DM for that matter) when I can see them, clear as day, bopping around Instagram? I know the acrylic nail proclivities of several ASMR YouTube stars, but I forget *entire friendships exist* because the person isn't on any social media.

OK, enough! By this point in the twenty-first century, a diatribe about social media is tiresome and redundant, but it is essential that we consider how our use of social media contributes to isolation, and how it can interrupt much-needed solitude. Connecting with people online can be thoroughly satisfying, and the broad, rapid connections that we can make since the advent of email and social media are astonishing. Fourteen-year-old me, stuck in the mid-'90s, will forever be jealous.

But it is not the same quality as being with someone in person. Being seen, human touch, experiencing the fullness of another person with their range of facial expressions, the timber of their voice, their laugh, the eye contact—that particular experience can be an antidote to isolation in a way that digitally mediated relationships cannot. Going to social media to counter isolation is like sitting in a bath when you're thirsty. Or chewing that weird, defunct Gatorade gum. Drink some water. Be with another person, in real life.

I highly recommend having a social media fast at least once a week for twenty-four hours. You'll recall in the Time chapter that I've asked you to take at least one (preferably two, but that's not always possible) day off from any work—including artwork—per week. On this day or these days, I ask that you delete all social media apps from your phone and that you refrain from any digital communication to the extent that you are able. Only you know if you are cheating! Breaking from social media for one day a week will contribute to a reset that may increase your willingness and desire to be with people, to have meaningful human contact. On these days, use texting only for crucial information or as a means to meet up in person. Did you know you don't have to answer every text immediately? I forget that, too.

I'M NOT ISOLATED . . . YET

Excellent, because this is the precise time to make plans for the inevitable isolation you will, at some point in time, experience. Our stronger selves can help our struggling selves. You have skills and tools available to you right now that are forgotten or dismissed when you're in the throes of isolation. Let's inoculate you from an isolation depression spiral. Or at least give you an isolation emergency pack

to use when you're in said spiral. Pick one or more of these tools to counter or reduce isolation. Feel free to adjust, add, subtract—whatever makes the tools work for you!

- ✦ Write a letter to yourself when you're *not* in isolation about what helps you. I know this can feel strange or even hokey, but it works. Tell yourself what it feels like when you're not isolating, who you love to be around, what you like to do. Remind yourself that the isolation is temporary and that there are small things you can do to help and that it's worth doing them. Seal this letter and stow it away somewhere private (but findable).
- ✦ Make a short list of the very best people to call when you're isolated and keep this posted somewhere in your home. This list should include people who love and accept you, who make you laugh, and with whom you can be 100% your suffering self. Tell each person that you're adding them to this isolation emergency list and what kinds of things you would like from them when you call upon them: GIFs, house calls, someone to silently watch TV with, a forced removal from your home, and so on.
- ✦ Draw up a simple contract with yourself about what you will commit to while you are in isolation. This can be things like getting dressed and brushing your teeth, going to the grocery store each day for a couple of items, staying off social media, and telling a few loved ones the truth about how you're doing.
- ✦ Commit to a compulsory art date once a month that will not be broken, even if you prefer to isolate. Part of your job as an artist is to have a community of artists and to engage with lots of kinds of work, frequently. Once a month—isolating or not—promise yourself this excursion.
- ✦ What and who are you least likely to flake on? It's helpful to know this about yourself. The self-perpetuating trap within isolation is pervasive canceling and flaking on people and plans because we just

can't imagine facing other humans or leaving our homes. But often we have specific people and plans that we are not willing to cancel on; this can create some helpful accountability when you need it most.

BUT MY JOB IS TO ISOLATE

In the case of isolated work being part of your employment, you need strategies for countering its negative effects when you're not working. I had a friend in my San Francisco Mission neighborhood who lived alone in an artist live/work studio. Every day at noon he walked twenty minutes one neighborhood over to the Safeway grocery store in the Castro, where he would buy lunch. He didn't have a kitchen in his live/work studio, so this was partly by necessity, but not keeping food in his place was also part of his strategy for breaking up the long hours of solitary work. The combined hunger and habit prompted him to walk forty minutes, see lots of people, and inevitably run into a friend or two. Rain or shine, he kept to this rule, which helped him avoid sliding into unhealthy isolating patterns, to which he was naturally inclined.

If your employment, creative or otherwise, requires you to be secluded for long stretches, then you will benefit from a schedule that brings you into regular contact with people. This is especially true if you're working at home, where you run the risk of working in pajamas, teeth unbrushed, for days at a time. In this case, you *must* have a daily practice of leaving your home and seeking human interaction. Going to a grocery store or coffee shop, running an errand, walking the dog, getting to the gym or a group exercise, having a weekly movie date—pick the things you want to do rather than the things you think you *should* do.

Working in proximity to other people, at least a couple of days, can help employment-related isolation. Public spaces like cafes, membership-based workspaces, or sharing a space with a couple of friends can help break up the week. It's worth experimenting to see how different ways of working in relation to other people impact you. My favorite co-working space in Los Angeles is the feminist arts nonprofit Women's Center for Creative Work. On weekdays they open up their facility as a co-working space for their members. An inexpensive alternative to some of the more luxurious co-working spaces around LA, the Women's Center for Creative Work makes it possible for freelance and self-employed feminist creatives to do their work but take breaks in the garden, building relationships with like-

mindful artists over tea. If your community lacks co-working spaces, it's worth asking arts and community nonprofits to consider developing the model. Earned income for them can mean affordable working space for you!

OK, I'M ISOLATING

Check in with yourself: Are you enjoying some solitude or feeling bummed by isolation? If it's the latter, I'm sorry, and it's OK. I swear this will pass, like all other feelings and experiences. This is not your permanent or final way of life. It's not only you who isolates and feels lonely. You are having a human experience that everyone else has. I isolate and feel terribly lonely sometimes, too.

I want you to pick one thing you are willing to do each day to counter the isolation: Make plans with someone, call a loved one, or go outside and just be in your neighborhood for an hour. Take one manageable step that is contrary to your method of isolation. I recommend keeping away from social media, favoring instead some real human contact. A kind barista, the sweet neighbor you encounter, the asshole neighbor you laugh about, your funniest friend—have a little contact with someone.

Look to your art for solace and guidance. Sometimes the lonely gnaw of isolation is what we *want* to feel. Sometimes a painful feeling is addictive or simply instructive. It's taking us somewhere, perhaps leading us to a place in our work that we don't know how to approach in any other way. It's OK to ride it out, but be aware of the *line* and notice when you cross it. Use your stronger self to help your struggling self.

8. Doree Shafrir, “Generation Catalano,” *Slate*, October 24, 2011, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2011/10/generation-catalano-the-generation-stuck-between-gen-x-and-the-millennials.html>. Jordan Catalano, played by Jared Leto, was the love interest of Angela Chase, played by Claire Danes, on the 1994 teen drama *My So-Called Life*. It only lasted for one season, but it was a defining cultural contribution.



MARKETING

CHAPTER ELEVEN

There's been too much attention on marketing. Can't we just talk about the paintings?

—JULIAN SCHNABEL

In a consultation session with a poet, my client dutifully reported on all of her marketing and promotional efforts from the previous week. Her newest book was about to be published by a highly respected press, and she was reluctantly taking all the necessary steps on Instagram and email to disseminate news of the publication and her subsequent book tour. “It makes me want to die,” she told me matter-of-factly. This was exaggeration, but only *just* so. She described the mood that she fell into following her efforts: She felt paralyzed and embarrassed. She hid out, avoiding people for a time. This client, like so many other artists in my life, despises marketing herself and her work. It’s worth unpacking, because this aversion gets in the way of artists’ intentions and goals for their work.

I have clients who must nap immediately after they press “send” on their email newsletter because they feel overwhelmed by the task and become despondent. Some artists post their art news via social media only because I follow them there and they know I’ll ask about it during our next session. Artists tell me that marketing—websites, social media, e-newsletters, any self-promotion, really—makes their skin crawl. They tell me that they feel ashamed, humiliated, gross, tacky, and vulnerable. They’ve internalized messages that they shouldn’t have to advertise their work. (Untrue.) They think if the work is *good* then it will find its audience. (Also untrue.)

Naturally, we want to avoid things that make us feel terrible, including self-promotion. And, for some people, marketing seems epically boring. My own wife made a fake snoring sound when I told her about this chapter. But if you want your art to have a big life, to reach audiences beyond your immediate friend circle, and to plant seeds for your career—well, then you need to publicize it. People have to be informed of what you’ve made and how they can access it. And your art is worth the discomfort that marketing may cause for you.

The digital age has all but eliminated the cultural capital of obscurity and our ability to stumble upon art that nobody knows about. Depending on your age, you may have experienced this in real time. Before the ubiquity of the Internet with its wonders and dubious fruits, there existed a sense of cultural weight—even solemnity—to art of any kind that remained undiscovered among your communities. Being “the first” to find something infused us with a sense of pride and prowess; we smugly claimed to know the work before introducing it to our friends. It was a (grating) bragging right, eventually ridiculed in the larger culture. Artists could leverage some cultural capital by being underground, obscure, unknown. Their work, we could imagine, was so brilliant that it would be found simply *because* it was brilliant.

And this experience felt extraordinary. Learning of something by accident instead of advertising is serendipitous and intimate. Happening upon a volume in a used bookstore, landing a record in a random bin, snagging a spectacular object in an estate sale—this deepens our relationship to the art. There is an intimacy, a sense of destiny, that we could be changed so much by something we found by chance.

Whether it was ever even true that obscurity added value to art (perhaps the concept has merely been padded with nostalgia for pre-digital living), it doesn’t work these days. There is now an *absurd level* of competition for our eyeballs, earholes, and dollars. Audiences for the world’s biggest live events⁹—music, theater, performance, even sports¹⁰—have declined for years. The unprecedented, lightning-fast churn of content in which we live means that if we want to share something with the larger world, we have to use tools to make it be known. The unprecedented noise of the digital age means you must do groundwork to inform your audiences about what you’re up to. Your fans—current and future—want to know about your work. They would be disappointed, even irritated, if you didn’t tell them about opportunities to experience and support your work.

In my sample of artists—a couple hundred—I’ve found a correlation. The artists that loathe marketing also loathe asking for things. Naturally this is true! Promoting oneself amounts to asking for a moment of attention or taking up space. Another correlation I’ve identified is that artists who avoid marketing tend to fear or want to control what other people think of them. This, too, makes sense. There is a specific vulnerability in showing yourself—your art—to the world; when we offer the work up to more and more people, the feeling intensifies. The bigger our lives become, the faster that illusion of control over how we are seen recedes.

Marketing aversion is a topic I am well versed in. I've been a late adopter of technology and social media my entire adult life. I didn't have a website until 2017, many years into my consulting practice. (For years, there was nothing from my private life online either. No defunct GeoCities or Angelfire fan pages. No ancient LiveJournals. No errant Tumblrs.) My business was entirely based on word-of-mouth advertising. My clients recommended me to other clients, which is how my consulting practice grew. I didn't need to invest the time and money in marketing because I had an extensive network of artists eagerly spreading my name around. My marketing, I'd decided, was *no marketing*. (Note the residual traces of my generation's preference for the cultural capital of obscurity.)

Some of this was, indeed, pragmatic. I saved a lot of time and money by *not* marketing my business and it grew regardless; I was fortunate and unusual in this regard. The added bonus was that my clients came to me pre-vetted; they'd already asked around about me, so I could be sure they were likely a match for my services by the time we made contact.

But some of the avoidance was my own fear. My biggest work-related anxiety was to be Yelped by a dissatisfied client. Nothing like that had ever happened to me, but living in San Francisco during the rise of social media, I wanted distance from feeling like I was a digital commodity. I had the same fears as many artists: If I take up a lot of space by marketing my work to broader audiences, then I become more visible. And visibility can be scary! Being seen means we are more likely to be attacked, ridiculed, copied, or called out. Plus, what if we become more visible and then we *still* don't have the success we're after?

Here's what changed for me: In 2018, my first book, *Your Art Will Save Your Life*, was published. In preparing for this book, I got really honest with myself that, unlike my consultation services, I could not sell a book by word of mouth. I needed to be of service to the book, meaning I needed to work on its behalf. I'd put a lot of thought and energy into the writing. I believed in the book and wanted a lot of people to find out about and read it. This meant I would have to do things that made me uncomfortable in order to promote it. I would have to get a website and a professional social media account. [Dramatic thunder!]

This subtle shift in thinking—from promoting one's *self* to one's *work*—can be a helpful change of perspective. Often, artists can understand the important, even crucial, value in promoting their work, though they feel reluctant to promote themselves. For artists who have been told by family or the larger world around them

that they don't matter, their voice isn't important, and they shouldn't take up space, it's a tall order to ask them to passionately promote themselves all over the Internet. And most of my clients have been told by the dominant culture that they don't matter; it takes years to unlearn and reverse this message. We have to find alternative ways for them to take up more space, to grow confidence in staking their claim as an artist. I ask them to think about promoting *the work*, which makes sense to them. We lean into the art.

I can't provide a specific marketing plan for you. It would be pointless because (a) digital platforms, trends, and media will change by the time you read this, and (b) I don't know your specific context. Instead, I ask you to assess your current promotional efforts, if any, and be willing to bump them up a couple of notches. Marketing is part of the business and administrative side of your art career; you should tend to this part weekly during the time you set aside for non-creation activities like email, finances, applications, and so on. Marketing comprises skills. You aren't born with them; you learn, and get better at implementing them with practice and learning. Don't despair if you believe yourself to be bad at social media or any other form of marketing. You're not "too old" or "too computer illiterate" to grow these skills. Just take the next step to learn on behalf of your art. Additionally, these are all tasks that can be outsourced to a professional or done through trade with another artist in your community. It doesn't matter who does it, so long as it gets done.

1. Website

Yes, you need a website. No, I don't think your old Tumblr is enough. It can be simple, but you need this digital lily pad where visitors land to learn more about you. You have choices in building this site: Use an inexpensive template-based platform; hire a website developer to create a more elevated site and train you to make updates; or skill-trade with a friend who has web expertise. If possible, get a domain that is your name, your artist name, or your project title. Usually, one site is enough unless you are marketing different bands, films, or other large, collaborative projects. I ask my clients to include on their site a way to contact them, an email-list sign-up, a bio (facts, not jokes), a brief artist statement, a calendar or events listing, a CV or arts resume, and high-quality documentation of recent work with

descriptions of each piece or project. You can expand far beyond that, but unless your practice is based in digital media, your website does not need to be highly sophisticated or conceptually remarkable.

Who will find this site? Lots of people! You have no idea. In my many years curating events, programming for arts organizations and contemporary art centers, and writing thousands of grants, I sought out hundreds and hundreds of artists' websites and they had *no idea* who I was or that I was looking for them. For example, when I worked at a contemporary arts center, I would propose artists to be curated in my department's events and exhibitions. To advocate for the artists, I needed information such as their bios, accurate writings about their art, and professional work samples (high-resolution images, links to well-documented performances, excerpts of writing, etc.) to show the gatekeepers. I could make a stronger case when I had access to current information and good samples. Artists with no websites (or hopelessly outdated websites) made my job difficult, and my department was always under time constraints. Artists might get passed over because I couldn't pull together good information about them quickly enough. Your website and its routine maintenance help other people know about your work on your terms (and in your words) and enables them to advocate for your work in ways you will not even know about. Yet.

If you have no website, please put down this book and buy a domain name as your first step; these can be purchased inexpensively online. Next, look up other artists' sites, which can serve as a mood board for your own site. This research will help you determine what you want and don't want on your site. Some sites will indicate who designed them and you can look into that specific designer. If you know the artist, ask them! Maybe they made their own site and could help you (for money or trade) create your own.

2. Social Media Platform

Whether you are social media abstinent or eight accounts deep as we speak, I recommend one professional account that is dedicated only to your work and your creative interests. Which platform you use is up to you and depends on both your discipline and the time in which you're reading this, as media changes quickly. For example, I don't recommend my clients use Facebook for their work anymore, but there was a time when it was crucial. Effective marketing trends change, but with a little research, you can determine the appropriate platform for your creative work

and the current best practices for that platform. All this is written about extensively online because it's advertising: It's big business. There is *endless* research available online about how to best use each platform for "your brand" (for which you can replace "your art").

Caveat: Because I care about your well-being and mental health, I want you to treat this art-devoted social media account as part of your job. Do the upkeep several times a week or each working day, but don't look at it otherwise. It's just marketing. It's not real life.

3. Email List

Yes, people still read emails. Not everyone, but enough people that you need an email list to maintain direct contact with your audience. Build an email list in order to update your audience periodically about your work, fundraising, events, and good news. Direct emailing is effective, because you can generally hold people's attention for a moment longer than a social media post; people will hang on to the email if there is information they need, whereas weeks-old social media goes into the great digital garbage pile in the sky.

You are not *bothering* people when you email them once a month or once per quarter with your news and upcoming events. (Weekly emails are too many, though, unless there is specific urgency to your updates. Or unless you're doing a newsletter as a project itself, which writers often do.) Your website platform may offer an option to build and format email newsletters using their templates, but these emails do not need to be long and complicated. I am a firm advocate of being brief and to the point, as many people will not read the entire message.

How do you get people to join your mailing list? Ask them! Invite them to join at your events, on your website, through your social media—but always ask them. Incentivize them! Tell them you will give periodic news about your work and how they can get more of it. Tell them secrets or jokes or post behind-the-scenes photos not seen anywhere else! They should join voluntarily rather than you arbitrarily dumping a bunch of addresses into your list, and there should be an easy way to opt out. A strategy that has worked for me: When I am asked to be on a podcast to talk about my work with artists, I dazzle the listener with my cunning wit, and then tell them that the best way to learn more about my services and get the Beth Pickens latest tips is to join my email list.

If you don't already have this, embed a mailing list sign-up on your website that directly feeds into a spreadsheet. Then you will have an easy way to snatch up all those addresses when it's time to send out a newsletter. Many email newsletter platforms can be linked directly to the email sign-up function on your website, meaning you don't have to manage it at all!

4. Partnerships

Every time you work with someone else—other artists, organizations, collectives, businesses, any entity at all—this is an opportunity for cross-promotion, in which you promote one another through your various channels. If you're presenting your work or yourself—at someone's art space, on a podcast, performing in a show, exhibiting work, in an online journal—use this opportunity to expand your marketing reach. Engage the other entities in cross-promoting through your combined marketing strategies. Give them your website, social media handles, mailing list, and any other methods you use. Do the same for them.

5. Direct Invitations

My favorite way to be marketed to is a brief, personalized message. It works. As you're thinking about your upcoming show, reading, event, exhibition, or premiere, make a list of the people you *really* want to be there, including your favorite artists. Forward your email invitation to them, one at a time, and personalize it, briefly telling the person that you would love for them to come. For people you know, tell them that it's important to you and you want their support. For the people you don't know or barely know, tell them why you think they, specifically, would like your work. Make these individualized invitations specific to the recipient. This method stands out from all the mass marketing pummeling us daily.

You may be at a stage in your work or on a specific project that you're not ready to promote, and that's OK. It's useful to gestate and put in the time before you share something. Sometimes sharing every moment of the development can stunt a project or slow you down. It becomes distraction rather than fuel. You may get reliant on instant responses, opinions, or gratification, and lose the plot on the project itself. But when you have an opportunity to share your work outside of your personal practice, then by all means, tell people about it! Your work is worth promoting. Your current and future audiences want to know what you're doing and how they can be a

part of it. It's easy to forget this or to feel overwhelmed at the amount of marketing thrashing us every second of every day. But this is your *art* we're talking about—the most intimate, essential part of your soul that you are sharing. Help people know about it.

9. Tom Jacobs, “Arts Organization Search for the Missing Audience,” *Pacific Standard*, June 14, 2017, <https://psmag.com/social-justice/arts-organizations-search-missing-audience-98173>.

10. Will Leitch, “Nobody’s Going to Sports in Person Anymore. No One Seems to Care,” *New York Magazine*, July 11, 2018, <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/07/nobodys-going-to-sports-in-person-and-no-one-seems-to-care.html>.



DEATH

+

GOD

CHAPTER TWELVE

No matter how much you've been warned, Death always comes without knocking. Why now? is the cry. Why so soon? It's the cry of a child being called home at dusk, it's the universal protest against Time. Just remember, dear Friends: What am I living for and what am I dying for are the same question.

—MARGARET ATWOOD, *THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD*

[B]ut I refuse to believe it's a coincidence that when R and I broke up in the front seat of his Pontiac “Breakdown” by Mariah Carey came on the radio at the exact moment he was avoiding eye contact and mumbling, “I don’t think this is gonna work out, dawg.” . . . I sat there for the last 1:47 of the song with the door cracked and sang my lungs out while R provided backing vocals before I got out. And then we never spoke again. LOOK AT GOD.

—SAMANTHA IRBY, *WE ARE NEVER MEETING IN REAL LIFE*

Besides marketing, this is the chapter that most deserves a trigger warning. My clients dislike marketing as much as they dislike talking about death. It’s a toss-up, though, as to which concept—death or god—wins the trigger-champion title. Last night at Dodger Stadium, a friend, the writer Karolina Waclawiak, said to me, pensively, as she gripped her Dodger Dog, “I think god and death are the same thing.” I’ve been thinking about how that is true in my life, that the source and space

in my spiritual interior marked for death and for god are the same. Unrelated in any way to a concept of an afterlife, they remain, for me, joined in one contemplative place.

Death and god belong to you. By this I mean that as a person graced with living, you must grapple with both death and god your entire life. I ask you to consider and reconsider your relationships to both, throughout your life, as they will continually change. You can claim and reclaim them, conceptualizing how to make meaning for yourself, regardless of your previous trauma with either or both. And most of us experience trauma with both death and god; the longer we live, the more they each become impossible, then plausible, and then impossible again. But, in any given moment, wherever you are in your relationship to death and to god is exactly where you're supposed to be.

Presumably, death is defined, but let's talk about what god is, or, at least, what I mean when I write the word *god*. First, what it is not. Rather than searching the Oxford English Dictionary, I'll instead invoke a favorite lesson from Berkeley-based rabbi Michael Lerner: The god you do not believe in is not god. Whichever images or ideas come to mind, the ones that make you wince and withdraw, that is not your god. The god you were told hated you or abandoned you or wouldn't accept you? Not your god. I want you to envision a god of your understanding. The word *god* can be an acronym, as it is in some 12-step programs, for *Good Orderly Direction*. Maybe your god is the universe, collective wisdom, nature, God of an organized religion, gods or goddesses, spiritual deities, reality, truth, ancestors, quiet, or some unknown force outside of yourself. Maybe you have no idea what it is, but you are willing to wrestle with the question. Atheists and agnostics, welcome. Replace the word *god* with the terminology of your choosing. What can you imagine that is bigger than you, that is fully outside of you?

So, what gives? What is *god* doing in a self-help book for artists? Am I trying to convert you to a religion or lure you into a spiritual cult? Reader, I am not. Instead, I ask you to conceptualize your spiritual life as one part of your holistic self, and in building a spiritual practice of any kind, it is useful to have a growing and evolving sense of what it is we are trying to connect to through that spiritual practice. Again, the god [or enter preferred word here] of your understanding.

Spirituality is a fixed part of my professional work. My first consultation with a new client is an epic two-hour intake session. During this time, my clients generously open up their entire familial and personal backstories, taking me through

the previous generations and their own lifetime, through the lenses of education, money, work, and important experiences, including deaths. This lengthy storytelling session gives me a foundation for knowing and understanding the client. I learn who socialized them, and with what beliefs and attitudes, and what they make of all this today. Next, I ask them to write for our subsequent session, reflecting on five categories of their life. Thinking about both the present and what they want in the future, I ask them to consider their lives creatively, professionally, financially, in intimacy, and *spiritually*. I often get raised eyebrows when I get to the spiritual category.

When the client returns for session two, we review their writing, discussing each category individually and how it plays out in their lives. The category that most often stumps is spirituality. Some artists tell me they have a spiritual practice, usually far differentiated from any major world religion. Many tell me they feel confused and disconnected from the concept; they're not sure what they want in this realm for their life. Most of my clients have a difficult relationship to "capital G" god. As most of my clients are women, queer, and trans artists, many of them have been harmed by religiosity in their families, communities, and cultures. Several clients grew up in cults and have a lot of related trauma; approaching anything religious or spiritual raises red flags. I have to tread lightly and carefully when asking artists to consider a spiritual practice that makes sense to them.

Still, I think getting to know our spiritual interior is crucial for a fully engaged life, and that it takes practice. I believe that artists' creative practices are a fundamental part of their spirituality. Sometimes, it's the sole aspect of their spirituality. When artists are in their creative work, they are able to deeply connect to themselves, other people, the world, and worlds beyond. This, to me, is the essence of a spiritual practice—deep connection to one's self and something outside of one's self, and the specific methods that make this connection possible.

I am also interested in you, as an artist, grappling with death acceptance. This is a *big* ask, I realize, but artists help us, en masse, confront and wrestle with mortality. And we need you to do so because we live in a culture of death denial, which is toxic and delusional. We will all die, as will everyone we know. Some of you reading this have an intimate experience with death, while others have not yet been deeply affected by

death and dying. Death can be an overwhelming and terrifying prospect, but it doesn't have to feel that way all of the time. We can transform the way we face the reality of death.

Part of my spiritual practice is a continuing relationship to death and dying. Called *death acceptance*, this means that I recall, through a number of gentle approaches, my mortality nearly every day. Art, music, apps, books, conversations, rituals, contemplative practice, the actual deaths in my life, and the broader circles of my community, all contribute to my death acceptance. “Why does she do this?” you may think. And you wouldn't be alone! Most people want to avoid thinking and talking about death because it's overwhelming, sad, and frightening. Many people, after a significant death in their life, are encouraged to “move on” as quickly as possible to get away from the tremendous wall of pain that death presents. Sometimes we use destructive numbing mechanisms in life to avoid the pain of death.

I find that, through death acceptance, I have been able to cope with the deaths in my family—both chosen and given family members—in more present, honest, and healthy ways. Death acceptance makes me very cognizant of my indeterminate time on earth, pushing me to really live the life I want, build the family and communities I need, and relish my life while always working to become the person I hope to be. In short, death acceptance fosters life appreciation. Gratitude is the outcome of death acceptance.

Is it a laid-back practice? It is not! Death is hard, no matter how you slice it. Considering my own death brings up consuming fear and dread, which is precisely why this is a lifelong, ongoing spiritual practice. Learning to tolerate and make some peace with the fear and dread is how my brain, slowly and over time, changes to be more in the present, able to endure grief and discomfort. If you refer back to the Time chapter, you'll note that remembering one's mortality can really kick better living into high gear.

I am also an eager follower of the Death Positive Movement, an organized effort by The Order of the Good Death, comprising death professionals, artists, and scholars who advocate for change in the way our society deals with (and avoids) death. This group, whose members produce everything from policy advocacy to home-funeral instructions, is greatly influenced by cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker and his 1974 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Denial of Death*.

The first two tenets of the Death Positive Movement¹¹ are as follows:

1. I believe that by hiding death and dying behind closed doors we do more harm than good to our society.
2. I believe that the culture of silence around death should be broken through discussion, gatherings, art, innovation, and scholarship.

Artists have always had a vital role when it comes to processing death; this is legible throughout the history of every art form. Where there is death, there is art, and vice versa. Thinking through contemporary works that help me confront death, I found thousands of examples I wanted to share, but I managed to whittle it down to a very short list. I noticed how different works focused on individual deaths while others created a way in which to consider mass death, something incomprehensible to my brain. I return to these and other works over and over again.

One artist important to me in this regard is AA Bronson, whose long and wide-ranging career includes the photograph *Felix Partz, June 5, 1994*. The 84-by-68-inch photograph portrays artist Felix Partz just a few hours after his AIDS-related death. Partz, a longtime collaborator with Bronson as part of the art group General Idea, is near skeletal to the viewer yet is dressed in bold patterns, surrounded by vibrant, living color. Bronson described the portrait as resembling the final weeks of Partz's life, lying in bed, receiving a steady stream of visitors. I love this particular photograph because it is so intimate. Looking at Partz, who had been alive just hours before, I feel the weight of the American AIDS pandemic, which I was too young to experience in a profound way, while also sensing the intense joy and love that surrounded so many AIDS-related deaths. Many people with AIDS died swiftly and alone, abandoned by family. But many others were fortunate to have a chosen community and medical care supporting them, tending to them all the way to their deaths. This photograph helps me glimpse a shadow of a feeling from the time: immense loss amidst radical caring. As a queer person, I feel a responsibility to return again and again to art from the AIDS pandemic years.

Another intimate glimpse into death comes from Edwidge Danticat's *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story*, which combines the powerfully personal story of her mother's dying from cancer with an examination of ways that other writers—such as Toni Morrison, Albert Camus, and Zora Neale Hurston—write about death. The structure of Danticat's book mirrors the intense in-and-out of death-related grief. One goes in or under, and then comes up and out for air. The way Danticat weaves

her personal narrative with the literary consideration of other canonical works reminded me of how important it is to give oneself moments of reprieve when a loved one is dying.

Long-term work that gestures toward death can cultivate a slow, contemplative space after an initial spike of pain. Composer William Basinski's "The Disintegration Loops" is a multivolume composition comprising an eroding tape loop, a bit of orchestral music that is disintegrating as it plays. The story surrounding the work connects it directly to the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center; Basinski captured hours of a smoking lower Manhattan on video from his Brooklyn rooftop after digitizing the music loop that morning. He eventually released a DVD of an hour of video set to the music, which I frequently watch. I naturally have an initial impulse to think of 9/11 and my memories from that day, the people I later learned had died, including the friends and parents of friends. Further into the work, I am reminded of the DNA Damage Theory of Aging,¹² which suggests accumulated DNA mutations contribute to aging. As the music loop plays, the tape is destroyed; similarly, as our cells regenerate, our DNA transforms, leading to age and death. Finally, as the hourlong video progresses, dusk transitions to night and Manhattan lights up. The rotation of earth and industry continue.

Truthfully, I want to write about hundreds of individual works that evoke death and dying (next book?) because I am so grateful to these artists. In the depths of heartache after significant deaths in my life, I have been soothed and astonished by artists' willingness to swim around in the pain and terror surrounding death in order to produce the work. Beyond that, they are willing to share it with the world. Edwidge Danticat, for example, could have kept her mother's dying process private, but she chose to move through it in the way she knew how—writing—and to connect that story to the death writing of other authors. Each work that deals with death is like a small road map, demarcating pathways of thinking about the most inconceivable fact of living. My inadequate mind doesn't have to try to figure out death; I can grasp it through hundreds of thousands of works created throughout history.

Death acceptance as a spiritual tool yields more for us. One of the founders of counseling psychology, Dr. Carl Rogers, had a central tenant in his person-centered approach to clients called *unconditional positive regard*, which means that the

counselor remains warm, supportive, and accepting of the client no matter what they do or say. For many clients in person-centered therapy, the therapist-client relationship is the first one in which they experience unconditional positive regard.

You might imagine how hard it is to develop this skill, and it is a skill, to be sure. Everyone—including mental health professionals—has preferences, biases, and aversions. One valuable strategy taught to me in graduate school is to visualize the client as a small child, sitting across in their kid clothes. This strategy is not used to infantilize the client; the aim is not to diminish or disempower the adult in front of you, but rather to build compassion by considering a longer arc of a human life. Every adult was once young and small and knew nothing of what was to come. In training, when working with a client that I had trouble connecting to or liking, I would visualize them as a young child, and this would instantly generate compassion for and commitment to the adult.

More than a decade out of graduate school, I have expanded that strategy significantly. I now imagine a person in their elder years, sometimes even picturing them moments after death. That's a swerve, I know, but this is a vital tool in dealing with other human beings in any situation, especially challenging ones. No, I'm not picturing my clients dead, sitting on my office couch, next to my Cher blanket. I connect to my clients right away; I find it very easy to love and have compassion for them.

Rather, this is a skill I employ with strangers (both online and in person) and with Difficult People. No, I'm not hoping or wishing for their death and I'm not fixating on anything morbid. I'm simply cultivating an instant moment of compassion by seeing another person for what they are: a human. Not a monster that wants to undermine me in a meeting, not an evildoer out to destroy me in traffic, not a troll seeking to annihilate me on the Internet. Just imperfect humans like me. Visualizing a person as a child, in their eldest years, and after death provides a crucial moment of pause and perspective; in that pause, I can cultivate a bit of compassion. Sometimes a bit of compassion is all we need to change an interaction or our perspective.

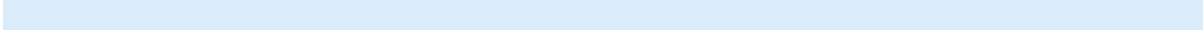
Try some writing about death and god. These aspects of life require tending, learning, and exploring, just like personal finance, marketing tools, and time management. I am quite serious in my drive to help artists get real with both money and death. We can value our lives more as we accept death. Gratitude and presence

are the rewards of cultivating a spiritual interior. Your creative practice can deepen and transform through your changing relationships to death and god; there is no goal, just a commitment to a lifelong willingness to move closer.

1. What is *not* god to you?
2. How have you been able to connect to something bigger than and outside of yourself? Through what means?
3. How are your creative practice and your spiritual life connected?
4. Which deaths have been most significant in your life? What did they teach you about living and dying?
5. What is most frightening to you about death? Most confusing? Saddest?
6. What do you remember thinking about death and god as a child? How has this changed throughout your lifetime?
7. Who in your life can you talk to about death and god? Who helps your thinking grow?
8. What art brings you closer to death? To god? Write a thank you letter to those artists.
9. Where and how do these themes show up in your art?
10. What do you want for your spiritual life? How do you want to relate to death?
11. **“Death Positive,” The Order of the Good Death,**
<http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/death-positive>.
12. **“DNA Damage, DNA Repair, Aging, and Neurogeneration,”**
Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, October 5, 2015 (10),
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4588127>.



CONCLUSION

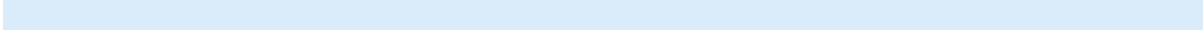


O tempora! o mores! I have no other lifetime to compare this to, but living in the early twenty-first century is a wild ride. You know what makes it better? Your art. Please keep making it. If you've skipped to the conclusion to get the CliffsNotes, I suppose it all boils down to this: Your life is finite, and you should make your art. Things will get in the way and you should still make your art.

Return to your art, over and over again. You will find clarity and answers as you feed this vital part of yourself. As you build and maintain a consistent practice, you will find the other parts of living a modern life seem more manageable. As you drift away from your practice, things get unmanageable again. That's life. You will fall away from a practice, and you are always invited to return to it in this moment, and this one, and this one. Your art is always waiting for you.



FURTHER READING



Hello, friends. What follows is a short list of additional reading materials because books are the answer to everything. These suggested titles can help you get started in some of the individual categories within the book and you should add to this list with your own recommendations. In fact, tell me what books help you so I can add them to my professional references. If you find there is a dearth of books on a specific topic, then get writing!

TIME

Abraham Joshua Heschel. *The Sabbath*. Farrar Straus Giroux: FSG Classics. 2005.

Jenny Odell. *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. Melville House. 2019.

Catherine Price. *How to Break Up with Your Phone: The 30-Day Plan to Take Back Your Life*. Ten Speed Press. 2018.

WORK

Lisa Congdon. *Art INC.: The Essential Guide for Building Your Career as an Artist*. Edited by Meg Mateo Iasco. Chronicle Books. 2014.

Marlee Grace. *How to Not Always Be Working*. Morrow Gift. 2018.

Sharon Loudon, editor. *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life: Essays by 40 Working Artists*. Intellect Ltd. 2013.

MONEY

Helaine Olen and Harold Pollack. *The Index Card: Why Personal Finance Doesn't Have to Be Complicated*. Portfolio. 2017.

Tonya B. Rapley. *The Money Manual: A Practical Money Guide to Help You Succeed on Your Financial Journey*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. 2018.

Bola Sokunbi. *Clever Girl Finance: Ditch Debt, Save Money, and Build Real Wealth*. Wiley. 2019.

Lindsey Stanberry. *Refinery29 Money Diaries: Everything You've Ever Wanted to Know About Your Finances . . . And Everyone Else's*. Gallery Books. 2018.

FEAR

David Bayles and Ted Orland. *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*. Image Continuum Press. 2001.

Michael Bernard Loggins. *Fears of Your Life*. Manic D Press. 2012.

GRIEF

Joanne Cacciatore. *Bearing the Unbearable: Love, Loss, and the Heartbreaking Path of Grief*. Wisdom Publications. 2017.

EDUCATION

Lynda Barry. "Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor." *Drawn and Quarterly*. 2014.

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DEATH + GOD

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Caitlin Doughty. *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: And Other Lessons from the Crematory*. W. W. Norton & Company. 2014.

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photo by Amos Mac

BETH PICKENS is a consultant for artists and arts organizations, holds a master's degree in counseling psychology, and has more than a decade of experience. She is also the author of *Your Art Will Save Your Life*. She lives in Los Angeles with her wife and pets.

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