

***From Feather to Wings:
A Flight Path to Success for Working Artists***

Crista Cloutier

crista@theworkingartist.com

The Day I Made an Artist Cry

2

I'm overwhelmed as I frantically prepare the gallery for an exhibition that evening. At the same time, I'm packing up art for a sales trip to New York. Wine and cheese are being laid out. I'm still putting labels on the wall next to each painting. Boxes and crates litter the floor. Life as an international art dealer isn't always as glamorous as one might think. In fact, it's nonstop.

As I'm breathlessly running around trying to get everything together, the front door opens. In walks a middle-aged man holding an art portfolio. He smiles at me hopefully.

"Oh no," I groan, settling down the wall labels. This happens all the time.

Sure enough, he starts laying his work out for me. I stop him, explaining that we don't have an appointment. And we will not be having an appointment because his work, although lovely, is not a subject nor a medium that I represent. End of discussion. I send him away.

He gathers his pieces and zips up his portfolio. He thanks me for my time, heads for the door.

And then he begins to cry.

Tears of frustration fall down his face. He wants to work as an artist more than anything, but he doesn't know how.

"I'm lost," he admits as he wipes his eyes quickly. "Who can help me? Where do I go?"

My heart breaks wide open.

We sit down and talk. I learn about who he is and what he makes and why he makes it. We look at his work again. Me, with new eyes now.

Because I no longer see a commodity in the market I work in. I see art. I see an artist with a creative impulse that deserves full expression.

And I feel an overwhelming urge to support it – because I knew that I can.

I would eventually become disillusioned with the insider's art world. You'll learn more about my story as you follow these pages. But the day I made an artist cry was the day my own Muse first whispered, "Follow this."

It took me a few years to understand how to answer that call. The journey of discovery that my Muse and I have travelled since has been profound. As you undertake your own creative journey, you'll hear whispers from your own Muse.

You might be confused. You might feel afraid. I'm here to show you that it's all okay. I'm here to guide you.

Follow this..

Celebrate where you are on your journey right now.

Take this moment Artist, wherever you are, and honor that. Honor the courage that it's taken to choose a path different from the status quo, to choose authenticity, to choose risk. Breathe it in.

Honor the audacity it takes to step on this stage and say, "I am here."

Because as an artist, you have embarked on a lifelong journey of asking questions, working with ideas, engaging with meaning, and creating a more powerful version of YOU in the world.

As we walk together, I'm going to lead you through growing the feathers of a working artist: from connecting with the artist you are, to setting your course forward, and then creating a practice that sustains you. I'll be pointing out signposts along the way.

You will strengthen your connection to The Muse, your own creative spark. You'll also develop the tools to understand yourself and your work in new ways as you move forward with growing confidence and purpose.

As we travel together, I'll be sharing my own artist's journey, and I'll introduce you to others who have walked this path. You are not alone.

My name is Crista and I'll be your guide. Know that you're in safe hands because I've guided many before you.

I've been lucky enough to work with countless other artists throughout my career; in the studio, organizing exhibitions and other creative projects, and most recently as the founder of "The Working Artist," where I guide artists worldwide as they develop their own professional practice.

This book is the result of a lifetime spent in conversation with artists about living and working as an artist.

I've come to believe that artists are leaders. I believe in the power of art. And I believe that there has never been a time in our history when art has been so desperately needed.

This is a call to arms.

The world is changing rapidly. As more people stare into their phones, trusting everything they see, following rhetoric that's easier to believe than to question, art still has the power to make us think and feel. Art reveals truth and incites change, even at its most humble.

These pages are for anybody who wants to work with their creativity in a bigger way. It's for anyone who's feeling stifled, stuck, or even scared. I wrote this book for you as a creative challenge, and I want you to take it as such.

The Flight Plan is divided into 10 feathers. Each feather will grow your wings so that you can fly to your truth as an artist. And that's where the gold is: *your* truth.

Although my professional background is in the world of fine art, I've worked with creatives of all disciplines. No matter whether you're a writer, an actor, a singer or a painter, this book is for you. Much of the language I'll be using and many of the questions are pointed to visual artists, but you can translate the ideas to your own art form.

Take what you can use and leave the rest.

I understand that your experiences, desires, and point of view are unique to you. And the artist's path isn't always linear. Your path may not travel as the crow flies. In all likelihood, it will twist and turn and sometimes even pirouette, making you feel dizzy and unstable. Real life is messy; my intention is to help you travel more gracefully.

The first part of this journey is what I call the 'becoming part.' This is where you truly realize yourself as an artist. Although it might sound easy, you'll meet challenges and resistance.

From there, we'll develop the skills that every artist needs: connection, courage, craft, voice, confidence, and resilience. Every artist must pay their dues. And then, we'll learn how to best share the work with others because your art demands to be seen. This is where you feel your light truly shine.

Along the way, I'll give you quests in the form of questions.

Resist the urge to simply read them and carry on. Just reading doesn't count. Instead, actively engage with the quests at the deepest level you can. Make yourself comfortable and really spend time with them. Commit yourself to the work and make it part of your practice.

You don't have to be perfect.

There's no need to wear your halo so tight that it gives you a headache. Capturing your answers as broad-brush strokes will work as a placeholder until you come back again.

[There are more quests on my website](#) if you want to go even deeper. Because it's the quests themselves that will point you in the best direction. The questions are where all the answers lie.

With the answers you unearth, you'll gain wisdom. Your confidence will begin to shine through all you do. The insights and practices you develop along the way will be your touchstones. They become invaluable as talismans of introspection, inspiration, and knowledge.

Yes, you'll continue to meet challenges.

You may get lost. Every artist feels lost on the path at one time or another. That's why I'm here to guide you. When you engage with the quests, they'll become the feathers – building powerful wings to lift your creativity free and high.

And what if you're already flying? Well, then you'll know that this is a journey without end.

Every time you take that leap of faith, you're starting the journey again fresh. Let this book help you fully embody what you've learned, guide you as you soar further up, and create a solid foundation for softer landings.

The depth of your experience is measured by the depth of your dedication. Have courage, Artist! If there was ever a time in your life to be honest with yourself and the world, it's on the artist's journey.

Because that's what this journey is all about.

Feather One: Connect with the Artist You Are

“I can’t call myself an artist,” the artist protested. “That word feels too big-headed and too grand. What right do I have to call myself an artist? That’s for other people to decide.”

Yet this same “artist” was doing beautiful work and already had an impressive CV. She wanted to share her work with a larger audience and command higher prices, but she’d gotten stuck.

Too many artists stop here. Unable to self-identify, they wait for the world to tell them it’s okay, to give them permission to take their place in the big-time. Then they resent it when the world fails to respond.

“But this isn’t how the world works,” I gently reminded the artist. “You have to show the world the artist you are, and then it will respond.”

Think about it: you’ve probably known who that is since you were young. That’s why our first feather will grow by going back in time and reclaiming the knowledge and understanding you already have. This is where you’ll connect with your creative spark. As we embark on this adventure, that spark will grow to a robust flame, guiding your way forward.

This feather, like every feather to come, will be filled with quests in the form of a question, a task, or an idea I want you to reflect upon. Take the quests seriously because they’ll help you learn to fly with greater intention and purpose.

I went all the way to France to write this book.

When I first decided to put pen to paper, I didn't know where to start. All I did know was that I had something inside of me that I wanted to say to you, and The Muse was telling me to jump, to take a leap of faith.

Desperate for inspiration, I did what writers have been doing for centuries; I packed up my notebook and went to a café. Maybe espresso would help?

The French waiter noticed the blank page and my heavy sighs. It was evident that I was stuck. He laughed as he asked what it was that I wasn't writing.

I told him that I wanted to write a book about being an artist, but I had so much to say that I didn't know where to start.

He nodded thoughtfully as he wiped the table. "It's good to be an artist," he mused.

He told me that being an artist is about being aware. He said that artists notice the palette of the autumn leaves. Artists see the light in other people's eyes. Artists stop to listen to the orioles sing their morning song.

"Artists," the waiter said with a smile, "find beauty in everything."

"I'm going to borrow your words," I told him.

He winked. "Talent borrows, Madame – but genius steals," he said, quoting Oscar Wilde. "Take my words as your own and start your book for artists there."

So, here we are. The waiter got me thinking...

I remembered that British artist Grayson Perry liked to tell this story of a group of schoolchildren who were visiting a museum. The curator asked the kids, "What is an artist?"

One little girl replied knowingly, "Artists are people who sit at Starbucks and eat organic food."

After touring the museum, the curator posed the question again. This time the little girl responded, "Artists are people who notice things."

It takes a special kind of person to notice things. It takes courage to create something from those observations. I believe that artists are makers: They notice, they think, they work, and they produce.

A working artist is a far cry from the popular depictions we see – overpaid charlatans, slothful drunks, starving dreamers, and Starbucks-sipping hippies. The life of a working artist goes beyond these trite clichés. It encompasses how we create meaning in the world, and the intentions behind the choices we make.

Because being an artist isn't just what you do – it's who you are.

Artists are people who notice things, find significance, and draw connections. By turning this impulse into a practice of making, the artist develops the skills to craft their work consistently and thoughtfully, bringing their vision into reality.

This is the work of an artist. This is your work.

FEATHER ONE. QUEST 1:

We often read books like this one because we're looking for change. Are you looking for change?

Do you want to change your circumstances? Your level of confidence or mastery? To increase your accomplishments? Or perhaps even completely transform your creative practice?

Of course, we all know that books don't change people. People change people. You are responsible for taking the choices that lead to change.

Your first quest is to complete this letter to Your Future Self. This is the self who has finished reading this book and already undertaken the quests. Who do you want that Future Self to be?

What has that Future Self attained as the result of our time together? (You are invited to visit my website to download your free workbook so you write your answers directly)

Dear Future _____ (your name here),

I chose to open this book and if it feels good, I'll continue to choose to engage with it. I'll commit to doing the quests and developing the tools that are presented.

The outcome that I'm working toward is: _____

I understand that it's my choices that determine my destination and not my past. I know that my present circumstances don't define me. I'm capable of whatever accomplishments I put my energy toward.

I'm looking forward to becoming you soon, dear Future Self. And I commit to taking growing the feathers to get there.

Yours truly,

William Wegman is a well-known photographer, painter, and video artist. I asked him when he first knew who he was meant to be:

"I was an artist for as long as I can remember. I was 'Billy the Artist' at school. I was the kid who always had their work pinned up or was always drawing pictures. So, I suppose I never really wasn't an artist."

When Did You First Suspect You Were Creative?

For me, it happened as a teenager

As a kid, I spent my summers at my grandparents' Minnesota lake house, perched on the edge of a forest. For two months every year, my suburban self was forgotten while I explored narrow wooded paths and meadows of high grass and fragrant wildflowers. My imagination ran wild with this feral introduction to nature.

I waved to the bluejays and danced with the wind. I bared my soul to every tree that would listen. The forest became my own magical world, where wildflowers spoke, and butterflies giggled.

Everything in my young heart heard the call: *Follow this!*

One day, I borrowed a camera to document my adventures. I stumbled upon a herd of deer quietly grazing. I hid so I wouldn't scare them, and I thrilled to every press of the camera's shutter.

Afterward, I lay in the tall grass of the meadow and watched billowing puffs of clouds change their color as the summer sun slowly lay down. I aimed the camera toward the clouds too. Total bliss. Because it was in that wild field, with a camera in hand, that I first fell in love with creativity.

As artists, we learn to trust that small voice that whispers "*Follow this.*" Like the Pied Piper, we follow its music beyond the rational, beyond the mundane, and sometimes even beyond reason.

As you and I take this journey together, you're going to connect with that voice. You'll learn to trust it. And soon, you'll be flying with it.

Follow this...

How Artists See

I was 17 years old and had an after-school job pouring coffee in a diner. One day a man sat at the counter. He was about 10 years older than me, bearded and wearing a bright tie-dyed tee-shirt. I handed him a menu and he smiled. I hadn't noticed that he was blind.

I'd never met a blind man before – but even I could see this man was special. The first time we met, he pulled out a large sheet of paper and a collection of colored pencils, and he started to draw. "But you can't see!" I blurted out.

He laughed. Blinded by a brain tumor when he was 8 years old, he'd always been an artist. He told me that he didn't stop just because he'd lost his sight.

I would watch him draw for hours, his face strained inches above the paper. He could still make out the lines. He drew with an 8-year-old's perspective, with the ground hugging the bottom of the page tightly. But his skies! His skies were glorious fields of color.

He signed each finished work carefully, slowly writing out the letters of his name: "Andrew David Smith."

I'd never met an artist before. I was nervous when I asked Andy how much it would cost to buy one of his pieces.

.

"I don't make these to sell," he said with a soft smile. Then he handed me the drawing he'd just finished.

I framed it proudly, the first piece in my collection. I have it still.

It wasn't about the art for him, he said.

“Being an artist is something one is,” he explained to me. “It’s not something one does. You’ll understand that someday.”

Andy could already see that I was an artist, though I myself was still blind.

How sad to be an artist who’s lost his sight, I thought.

But Andy disagreed. “I was so in love with art when I was a boy,” he said, “that losing my sight wasn’t even really an interruption. I didn't have the feeling that I lost something, but that I gained something. Now I could focus more on painting and drawing what I felt and not trying to make it look like what I saw.

“The same way that on a hot summer’s day the sky will come out red, I'll feel the mesquite tree. I'll feel the branches and that branch will find expression in the piece, or I'll go sit down by a stream and I'll touch the gravel and the rock, and I'll get a feeling for the texture of it. And then I just allow my hand to express it.

“I know my medium,” he explained. “I can feel the color of the pen now so when I reach over, I know when I touch the blue pen.

“Right after the brain surgery, when I became conscious, I remember that I was seeing sound, and I was smelling color, and all my senses were blended. In so many ways, my eyesight wasn't all that important anymore because my attention had turned even more inward.”

One day Andy came into the diner with another man. They sat in a faraway booth but the fragments I caught of their conversation captivated me. They were speaking of things I felt in my soul, things I'd never been able to find words for. Art. Creative spirit. Bringing the invisible to the visible. I kept their coffee cups full as I strained to eavesdrop.

When they started to leave, I impetuously grabbed Andy's arm, “Please,” I whispered, “Explain to me what you were talking about with that man.” And this was how Andy became my first spiritual teacher.

We met at the coffee shop every Tuesday night. He patiently answered all my questions, the ones I'd pent up for years. Questions about the essence of life, art, and meaning.

“Truth is everywhere,” Andy taught me. “And artists open themselves up to everything, always seeking beauty.”

He described the universe as a magnificent vase that had smashed into tiny pieces. “And many of us cling to our small shard of glass, insisting it's a vase, missing the whole picture. If only we could bring all our shards together.”

The way that Andy moved through the world was magical. When he decided to spend the summer in the mountains, he told me he needed to buy a van.

"But you're blind," I reminded him. "You can't drive."

A few weeks later, he won \$10,000 in the lottery and bought that van. Then a friend mentioned he was looking to summer in the mountains and offered to drive them both there. That's how Andy rolled.

He knew things about people that couldn't be seen. The energy that came from his hands was so strong that I would watch him light candles without a match. The flames simply burst into being when he focused on them. It sounds impossible – but Andy introduced me to world of magic that I wouldn't have believed if I hadn't seen it.

And when he smiled, joy spilled from his face like the colors in his drawings.

I would have other teachers over the years, and I would know thousands of artists. But when I think back on my friendship with Andrew David Smith, I'm so grateful that the first artist I ever met was blind.

Because the greatest lesson he taught me was that you don't need eyes to see.

FEATHER ONE. QUEST 2:

22

Who was the first artist who had an impact on you? What was that impact?

Do You Have a “Calling” to be Creative?

Who's calling you? Where are you being called to go?

Artists aren't the only ones who feel called. When a person dedicates their career to religion, to God, we say they have a “calling.” And it expands beyond the spiritual. Anyone who works with a sense of fulfilling a destiny or purpose can be said to have a calling. In other words, a calling is something outside of ourselves that speaks to something within. It's an impulse, an urge, an invisible sense of direction. Most doctors follow a calling. Some teachers, too. I know farmers who have callings.

Do you feel a calling?

I've met artists who haven't felt called but think the path of an artist is always fortune and fame. And to them I say, "Good luck with that."

As an artist you need to have that inner compulsion, that drive, to carry you past the challenges and hurdles that this life brings. Maybe that's why so many artists suffer years of confusion and conflict before finding the courage to fully answer the call?

It's understandable that we hesitate because our culture itself doesn't value creativity. We cut arts curriculum from education, expect creatives to work for free, place art in a little-teeny-tiny box and dismiss it as irrelevant compared to “real” vocations.

We too often fail to place worth on anything that doesn't have apparent monetary value. Sure, it's easy to answer the calling to be a doctor. Your mother will be proud! Or the call to go into politics? You'll have influence, power, and fame!

But the call to be an artist? Get real! You'd better find something to fall back on.

I'm not suggesting that the artist's path is less noble. Far from it. The artist's path is less traveled because the ladder to success isn't as visible as other vocations. As an artist, you must chart your own course, create your own touchstones, define your own levels of success.

No wonder it often takes us so long to heed the call. The call to work with our creativity is so outside the rules of society that we often don't even understand what's being asked of us.

We spend years lost in confusion. We want to do something. Something big. Something important. But we don't know exactly what it is. We feel jumpy. We want to jump.

But jump where?

You're being called to take a leap of faith into the unknown, into the invisible to create something meaningful. Something of value. Something that's never existed before. You are an artist. This is your calling. Trust that voice.

Follow this...

When I turned 18, I found myself at a crossroads.

I'd grown up in a family where science and mathematics were the proper courses of study at university. My family didn't have the vocabulary to understand what was wrong with me, why I was so different.

I scribbled heartfelt poetry, took snapshots in stark black-and-whites, and always insisted on adding purple food coloring to our mashed potatoes.

The word "creative" wasn't part of my family's vocabulary – but the word "strange" was.

Concerned about my future, my parents pressured me to become a nurse, they begged me to learn to type so I could work as a secretary. They said, "Crista, we just want you to have something to fall back on."

But I didn't want to fall back. I wanted to fall *forward*.

I wasn't compelled to walk the safe roads; my soul urged me to follow beauty and chase adventures. I wanted to fall forward, to bloody my knees embracing mystery and meaning.

I confess I haven't always been as brave as I aspired to be.

Falling back is a siren song for all artists because the unknown can be terrifying and the pressure to conform can be immense.

But every time I've fallen back, I've landed on my ass. And each time I've fallen forward, I've landed on my knees. Often in pain, sometimes in fear, but always ending in gratitude.

Artists constantly fall.

Our very work entails that we put the most personal, vulnerable, and private parts of our soul out there for the world to judge. Of course, it's scary. And yes, you're going to stumble sometimes.

But working artists always get back up.

And then jump again. More risk. More work. More reward. Continually reaching for challenges, never hiding from them. This is how greatness is born.

FEATHER ONE. QUEST 3:

Falling forward is about taking risks. It's the jump, the leap of faith.

Can you remember times that you've fallen back? Write about a time that you took the so-called safe route but then you landed on your ass.

And have you ever fallen forward? Write about a time that you fell forward and began to fly.
(Hint: they're sometimes the same fall.)

Raise your hand if you're familiar with the term "having something to fall back on."

Listen, I love to eat as much as the next artist. Probably more. I love being comfortable and having nice shelter. I understand that making money is part of living in the modern world.

But falling back isn't the only option. And I can't think of any other profession that demands one prepare for failure.

However, it is important to understand that making a comfortable living from your art itself is a long-term plan. Any creative career is a marathon and not a sprint. Some artists are never able to achieve a consistent income from their work, but it's not because they aren't talented or dedicated enough.

Let's change the paradigm of what success looks like. I suggest that if you can use your creativity to make your living, or to get your work in front of an audience, that's a worthy goal.

For example, I know visual artists who make money by painting decorative murals in people's homes. I know photographers who work commercially by day and do their art on the weekends. I know an actor who started a historic tour of his city and delivers his eclectic tours as performances in character. I myself teach and coach other artists about their professional practice to support my creative work. In fact, teaching is a time-honored tradition for all artists to pass on their knowledge and insight.

This is the truth: your art is not here to support you. You are here to support your art.

Therefore, any way that you can find to put your creativity to work to support your growth is success. This means that you can celebrate taking a job that hones your craft or helps you find your artistic voice or builds your audience, or perhaps even helps you to invest in your work financially. You are supporting your art – and yourself.

I'm going to be talking more about each of these subjects deeper as we continue. For now, I want to assure you that it doesn't take a vow of poverty to be an artist. It doesn't mean you've got to suffer or leave your family or quit your day job.

Start with where you are right now, what you've got to share.

Bring more of yourself and your creativity into your life. Allow that energy to radiate into everything you do. If you can do that while making the creative work you love and getting it in front of people, in my book you're a success. And this is my book.

FEATHER ONE. QUEST 4:

Think of all the art projects you've worked on, and all the jobs you've had – in and out of art. Can you start to list your accomplishments? Even if they seem unrelated or unimportant right now.

Don't edit yourself and don't leave things out. Life is messy and you can be messy too.

Wear the Badge Proudly

Before I go outside, I pin a badge to my coat. The badge says ARTIST.

On the street, people look at me aghast, like I'm wearing my bra outside of my shirt. Are you insane?

But this little ARTIST badge is a magnet for magic. On the bus, at the café, on the street, artists approach me and confess, "I'm an artist too. May I have a badge?"

I joyfully scatter them like apple seeds.

When I see an artist painting the landscape or drawing on the sidewalk, I talk to them about their work, and I hand them a badge.

I've given badges to homeless artists. I've given badges to successful artists who just looked homeless. They really love the badges at art fairs where everybody's wearing black so you can't even tell who the artists are.

"Wear the badge proudly," I say. There's always a glimmer of delight in an artist's eyes when they pin that badge onto their chest.

It happens every time.

INVITATION:

Go to my website to download your free ARTIST badge screensaver.

Let this gentle reminder fill you with purpose and direction. This is who you are.

Who Do You Think You Are?

How many of us are afraid to say who we are and what we want? Afraid of disappointing our parents, our friends, lovers, colleagues?

Almost every artist battles the accusing echoes, "Who do you think you are to call yourself an artist?" We're afraid we don't deserve the badge. It's pompous, it's show-offy, it's pretentious.

Who do you think you are?

We think it takes someone else to anoint us as an artist before we can own it; we think we need somebody's permission.

Who do you think you are?

But The Art Pope doesn't exist. Nobody's going to anoint you or give their blessing. Living your truth, acknowledging this compulsion to make meaningful work, is a jump that you make alone. Without apology. Without permission.

If you're waiting for someone else to tell you who you are, you'll always be standing in the wings of your own life, waiting to be invited to the spotlight.

But maybe you're one of the lucky ones? Maybe you've claimed your identity and accepted your path? Maybe you've learned to embrace the label of ARTIST and you wear the badge proudly? So few do.

It boggles the mind that there's so much shame attached to this one word, this one label.

ARTIST.

But shame and creativity make a lethal cocktail. You can't afford to feel shame because shame shuts creativity right down. Think about it: can you name one good idea that's ever come from shame? No! Shame is poison to artists. Avoid it at all costs.

When someone challenges your right to the term ARTIST, they're acting from their own shame, their own issues. Maybe they're jealous?

And it's not just the voices of others; sometimes life has a way of making us question ourselves. When you don't feel supported, when you get negative feedback, when the ideas just won't come, that old question raises its head again: *Who do you think you are?*

Remember: being an artist is who you are. That doesn't wash off. Sometimes it might just need to be polished so your light can shine more brightly.

Say it: "I'm an artist."

Say it again! "I'm an artist."

Own it, Artist. It's yours.

CHALLENGE:

As we move forward on this journey, I want you to banish any doubts from your mind, erase the memories of other people's opinions, and stop waiting for permission to wear the badge. I'm giving you that permission now.

Say it: "I'm an artist." I want you to own it. To step into it. Say it out loud. Say it online. Scream it out madly as you run naked down the street. "I AM AN ARTIST!"

Because no four words empower you more: I am an artist.

And so you are.

And Then the Artist Asked, "Where Do I Begin?"

Begin with the questions.

"Learn to love the questions themselves," advised the wise poet Rainer Maria Rilke.

The root of the word question is "quest." Follow your questions. Be curious about them. See where they take you.

This is the truth: you don't have to have it all figured out right now. You don't have to have any of it figured out. You've just got to start asking questions. Because that's where the answers are.

But what if you're scared? What if you're confused? What if you don't know? What if you're still unsure that you're an artist?

What if you don't have the credentials, the ideas, the money, the time? What if you don't have all the above?

Take a breath.

Now snap out of it!

Life is always going to constrain. All you can do is work with what you have. It's about the work, not the limitations. Keep working through them.

Credentials are vastly over-rated so don't weigh yourself down by worrying about what you don't have.

Ideas will come when there's fertile ground. If you're feeling stuck, nourish The Muse and She will feed your imagination.

And money?

What if I told you that you don't ever have to worry about money?

It's true. You don't have to worry because worrying is a choice that won't affect the outcome. You've just got to work with what you have, trusting that you'll create what you need when you need it.

Worry really is a choice. It's a bad one because it wastes your energy. Choose to focus on the work instead. Choose to create solutions.

And time?

Well, that's the whole point. It's about bringing more of yourself into your life all the time. This moment is the only one that counts because this moment is the only one you have.

It's time to choose your path – now.

FEATHER ONE. QUEST 5:

No matter what kind of creativity you practice, it's always important to have a biography.

Whether it's for your website, a performance, an exhibition, or even a publication, people will want to know who you are—professionally speaking.

A bio is a one or two paragraph encapsulation of your professional experiences. Where did you study? Who did you study with? Anyone well known? Where has your work been seen before?

Artists who don't have formal education or experience often get stopped by the biography. Don't be stopped.

Everyone must start somewhere. Even Beethoven took piano lessons. So, embrace your past to lay the groundwork for your future. Your biography will grow as you do.

For this quest, you will write your professional biography.

In one paragraph or maybe two, tell me what you have done as an artist. Have you performed or shared your work? Have you been profiled online? Go back and look at your answers to the previous quests, you'll find some real gold there.

Own your accomplishments!

Feather Two: Setting the Course

40

On the artist's journey, it's important to center yourself, take stock of your resources and begin to identify where you want to go. Keep engaging with the quests – they point to gold.

As you grow this feather, I'm also going to arm you with knowledge of the monsters and traps that are ahead. But take courage Artist! You're not alone. You'll meet teachers and guides along the way.

One of the reasons that I love working with creative people is the conversations. In my experience, we go deeper and get more real than many people who work in other professions.

Creatives often share the same history, vocabulary and benchmarks with those who are engaged with similar work as themselves.

One artist who's shared a lot of art talk with me over the years is Dan Adel, a massively successful illustrator, portraitist, and fine artist who exhibits his work all over the world.

I asked Dan what advice he gives artists at the start of their journey?

"Be as clear in your mind as you can about what you absolutely love. Know the art you love, the type of artists you love, the colors you love, whatever. You have to tap into what you're absolutely and instinctively drawn to."

Isn't that great advice? And easy to follow! Find what you love and learn more about it.

Another one of my mentors, Bill Jay, once wrote that artists are people who express their potentiality in actuality.

I love that – but what does it mean? It means artists understand that true creativity comes from the pursuit of knowledge and spiritual enlightenment, or meaning-fullness.

It means that artists are on the Hero's Journey.

The renowned scholar Joseph Campbell described the Hero's Journey as "separation, then initiation, until finally you return, forever changed."

“Separation” is the jump. Separation is when you hear the call and take responsibility for it. You're woken up from your life and are summoned to adventure, and ultimately toward transformation.

“Initiation” is the quest itself. This is where the questions guide you, where you fall forward. Guidance paves the way; it helps you to create your flight plan and stay on course.

Guidance comes in the form of whispers. That's the part that always frustrated me. I want my guidance to come with trumpets and neon signs: FOLLOW THIS!!!

But the path of an artist is never proscribed. You create it as you follow the quiet messages, as you follow the guidance. Joseph Campbell suggested that we find guidance by doing those things that make us feel alive. This gives us courage to face those things we fear.

Campbell tells us that after we slay the monsters in our initiation, we return to where we began but now, we're different. We've transformed. This is the most rewarding part of the Hero's Journey: this is where we share what we've learned.

To me, that's what art is. Art is how we express what we've discovered, the gifts we were given on the journey. It's where we express our potentiality in actuality.

Art is our offering back to The Muse.

But remember, the Hero's Journey has its dangers, there lies within each of us a diabolical monster whom I call "Not Enough." This monster happily sleeps when you play small, but when you dare to dream, to embark on a new path, especially one as heroic as the artist's journey, the monster wakes up with a roar: "YOU ARE NOT ENOUGH!"

Even more terrifying is that this monster is a shapeshifter. It lives inside you, yes, but it also hides in wait at every turn of your journey, mirroring your deepest anxieties. This is the monster you've got to slay again and again.

Because that monster is a liar. It speaks with no authority – only fear. You are Enough. Truly, you are. And ultimately, this is what your journey will teach you as you engage with the work.

Everything that you now identify as your weakness, as your personal Not Enough, has the potential to be your super-power. So, embrace it. Don't be afraid of it. Don't be afraid to be different.

In this book, I'm guiding you through the ten feathers you'll need to grow to work as an artist. Remember that the path is rarely linear. I find that it can often twirl and swirl like a leaf in the wind. Things that held you back before may be showing up again on a different level.

It can be frustrating.

But you're an artist and this is the path you'll be on for the rest of your life. Continue to follow your curiosity, conquer your foes, aim higher, and look ever deeper.

All artists feel afraid. The successful ones take the risks anyway.

Who is this Muse of Whom We Speak?

The ancients believed The Muses were goddesses whose role was to inspire artists. I buy that.

The Muse takes on whatever form you feel comfortable with. She's here for you.

But as to the language used to understand Her, well, that's your choice.

Some people are comfortable with words like God and Goddess. Others prefer the more ambiguous term The Universe or even Higher Power. Some people believe in magic and others see The Muse in more metaphorical terms.

She's your Muse. It doesn't matter what you call Her. Or Him. Or It. Or Them.

I call Her a She, but She's whatever name that you give to that small still voice that drives you to create, urges you forward, and fills you with ideas.

The Muse is a concept, a name I use to point to something that already resides inside you, not something that you seek externally. Because it's by connecting with her voice (meaning your voice) that you transform your practice, transform your life.

The Muse is your guide on this artist's journey. She believes in you.

But peril to the artist who ignores Her! Don't ignore your Muse. She can be mean when she sulks.

Too often, I see artists get demanding and needy with their Muse. They want her to feed them a steady source of inspiration, but they don't nourish her in return. Muses need love too, you know.

What's the best way to feed your Muse? It depends on your medium, your interests and your Muse.

But I will say that I've never met a Muse who didn't like learning. Looking back at the work of the great artists who went before you makes The Muse happy. The Muse feeds on nature too. Anywhere you can find beauty and meaning would please your Muse.

Allow your Muse to drink deeply and often from the wells of inspiration and she'll reward you richly.

My friend Mark walked with The Muse, shining the light of his creativity on all he did.

We met in art history class, where we fell in love. Not with each other, mind you, but with Vincent Van Gogh's masterpiece *The Starry Night*.

Mark wasn't the kind of guy one usually meets in art history class, but he'd been inspired to study art after hearing the song "Vincent" by Don McLean. Mark would often sing it as he played his guitar.

Mark was different from the other art history students. He was outdoorsy, boisterous, funny. And he loved garbage. Eventually, Mark started a successful demolition business. He laughingly called himself "The Junkman."

He became an artist himself, and his medium was all those things that other people threw out. His business gave him not only the best materials, but he made enough money to focus on his creative work. "Art from junk," he'd call it with a smile.

We became art buddies, geeking out over what we'd seen or stuff we'd made. Sometimes he'd play his guitar, inventing funny songs to make me laugh.

I kissed him once.

It was at one of his infamous parties. He'd somehow talked me into joining a ladies arm-wrestling contest and cheered me on when I won a bottle of tequila. Then we climbed up a tree where I nursed my sore arm, and we took swigs from the bottle.

Even though we were buddies, I kissed him because Mark was the coolest guy I knew. I'm pretty sure that if you'd been sitting in that tree, you'd have kissed him too.

We always laughed about "Mark and Crista sitting in a tree: K-I-S-S-I-N-G."

We laughed about everything because Mark found humor everywhere. He transformed more than garbage. He made everything better.

But Mark, who loved life so much, would one day end his own.

Like so many artists, Mark fell victim to the ravages of depression. I don't know what treatments he sought, but I do know this: artists, by definition, are treading in deeper emotional waters than most. The number of emails that I receive don't lie; many of us have a familiar relationship with substance abuse or have seen psychological issues up close and personal.

Our collective history reminds us of other artists who have succumbed. Therefore, it's imperative that you guard your mental health and emotional states, that you look after yourself both physically and psychologically. The dangers are real.

We all acquire wounds in our lifetime, physical and psychological, some small, others debilitating. The point of these wounds is to heal them. Get help where needed.

What are your wounds? Are they stopping you? What resources do you have to be well, to restore yourself?

And in those times when it seems there is no light, when darkness swirls like Van Gogh's night sky, take your pain seriously. Reach out for help. Eat well, rest, do those things that heal, and relinquish those habits that hurt.

When I close my eyes, I can still hear Mark strumming his guitar as he sang, *"And when no hope was left in sight, on that starry starry night, you took your life as lovers often do. But I could have told you Vincent, this world was never meant for one as beautiful as you."*

I hope you found happiness, my dear eternal star.

It Happened to Me Too

As a young woman, I suffered from mental illness and emotional problems. I self-medicated with drugs and drink.

I was a broken girl, in and out of hospitals, on and off the streets. It was a violent, toxic existence, filled with shame and self-loathing.

Creators who don't create often self-destruct. I'd heard the call to follow a creative path, but I didn't know how to silence Not Enough so that I could answer the call. Without anything to give my life meaning, it spun out of control.

Cocaine was my drug of choice, and I moved in the underbelly of the drug world. Needing money, I suggested my cocaine dealer let me help with sales and marketing. It turns out that I had a gift and soon I re-organized his operation. Other cocaine dealers hired me as a consultant. And then I became a cocaine dealer myself.

The problem was, I was addicted to my product. Not only was that bad business, but it was also killing me.

In one of many attempts to save my life, my family talked me into taking a semester of college. I registered for a random assortment of classes including the History of 19th Century Photography taught by Professor Bill Jay.

I rarely went to class and when I did, I was wasted.

At our mid-semester conference, Bill told me, “You’re failing my class. Nobody has ever failed my class. You must be really bored.”

I couldn’t tell him that I was drowning.

But Bill persevered. He said, “Listen, if you were to study the history of photography and take it seriously you can make Photographic Studies your major. With that degree, you can have a career as a scholar. You can eventually get your MFA. You can write and take photographs and teach.”

You can...

It was the first time in my life anyone had ever said those two words to me. Before Bill Jay, the only two words I’d ever heard were “Not Enough.”

I became a Photographic Studies major that very day. From then on, I showed up. I sought help for my problems. I got straight. I worked hard to make Bill Jay proud of me.

It didn’t matter that Bill didn’t know anything about me. It didn’t matter that he was building a new Photographic Studies department at the university, and he was inviting every student to join.

What mattered was that when Bill Jay said, “You can,” those words whispered to my heart:

“Follow this...”

FEATHER TWO. QUEST 1:

Write about a teacher, mentor family member, or friend who believed in you.

The artist's journey doesn't have to end in tragedy. It's meant to be a Hero's Journey; one where you overcome your challenges, embody your worth, and express what you're learning through the art itself.

The way out of darkness for me was starting the journey. It was growing the first feathers of my own creative wings. But too many artists cling to darkness, instead of light.

You don't have to suffer to be an artist. Our cultural myth celebrates artists who cut off their ear or took their own life. The world wants to make victims and martyrs of creative people.

But it's the resistance to that old story that makes you a hero.

The path of an artist is isolated, and it can be lonely. The best way I know to guard against the dangers is to find a community of other artists, other risk-takers just like you. You don't have to walk the path alone.

Having a community will also serve your growth as an artist. Don't be afraid to connect with other artists. Accept their help and offer yours too. Other artists are not your competition, they're your colleagues, on the same path as you.

Create the vision and together we'll plan your artist journey with a happily ever after.

Bill Jay's enthusiasm for my future would prove to be more addictive than drugs.

Up until that time, I had presumed that everyone else in the world was born knowing how to do things. I thought that knowledge and talent were traits that other people were born with but somehow, I'd been left behind.

Bill taught me that I was wrong.

He ignited my curiosity. He gave me permission to learn, which meant he gave me permission to fail, to question, to try again, to feel awkward, to make a fool of myself, again and again until I got it right.

Soon I fell in love with the process of learning. It wasn't just about formal study but about opening myself to new wisdom and knowledge and ideas.

Fortified by education, my Muse stopped sulking and drank in these new experiences and knowledge. And that's how all the closed doors of my life opened. I had held the key to success all along. Anything I didn't know, I could learn.

And you can too.

FEATHER TWO. QUEST 2:

As artists, we're constantly questioning ourselves and that's a good thing. But it's easy to get caught up in questions that are disempowering, questions that feed the monster called Not Enough. So, remember to be careful how you frame things because the better the question, the better the answer.

These are some quests that every artist must undertake:

What is it that you want to accomplish as an artist?

If you're like me, you probably have 100 responses. But when we have too many answers that question never gets its reply.

Focus on what you want to do next. That makes the most sense for your practice? Focus on or where you are right now and what you have. What's your first priority?

Where do you want your creativity to take you? When you dream your dreams, where do you see your work taking you?

Are you going there now?

Are you pointing in the right direction? Or is it time to pull out the map again?

Why? is one of the most important questions an artist can ask. Ask it often.

Why is your work important to you? Why do you create what you do?

I don't care if your art is about craft, post-modern theory, flowers, politics, pet portraits or landscapes. So long as you're engaged with meaningful work, so long as you are expressing your unique voice, that's all that matters.

And now you're asking, **How?**

Little-teeny-tiny steps. That's how.

My plan became to write, make photographs, and teach. But honestly, have you ever known life to go according to plan?

After studying the history of photography and later getting my master's degree, I worried that the only thing I was qualified for was great dinner party conversation.

But never underestimate great dinner party conversation! It was at a great dinner party that I first met the founder of a celebrated fine-art print studio.

I told him I needed a job, and he asked if I knew anything about printmaking?

I had never even heard of printmaking.

"I love printmaking!" I told him, lying right through my teeth. "I printmake every day!"

And then I learned everything I could about printmaking.

He hired me as a part-time assistant in the sales department. A glorified intern, really.

I didn't know the first thing about selling art, but it turns out that selling art is not so very different from selling cocaine – questions of karma aside.

Marketing and selling art would become my super-power. Within a year, I had worked my way up the ranks to become director of the whole company.

So much of what influenced the work in the art studio took place outside of it. I constantly travelled to museums, galleries, and artist communities around the country. Books arrived in the mail each week. Conversations with artists, gallerists and curators would introduce me to new artists, ideas, and markets.

We worked with artists of international stature. We introduced unknown artists to the marketplace. We championed minority and under-represented artists.

I sold lots and lots of art. I curated exhibitions, opened a gallery, published essays and articles about artists. I even produced documentary films about art.

It was exciting stuff.

The thing is, I'd imagined a different journey as an artist, a more creative journey than supporting and promoting other artists' work. But this was the opportunity that real life presented so I *followed this*, telling myself it was an apprenticeship. After all, apprenticeships have a long and honored history in art.

The truth is, I was working with incredible people on significant projects that had a great deal of meaning for me.

The studio was known for exploration of creative process. There, artists didn't simply show up with a painting under their arm and tell us to reproduce it. Instead, we prided ourselves on being a collaborative studio, working with each artist to produce unique images, and artists arrived by invitation only.

Over the many years I led the studio and its gallery, I had the honor of working with dozens of artists from all over the world. Basically, I was using the power of my office as director of the company to work with all my art heroes. (Don't judge me – you'd do the same!)

The thrill of meeting someone whose art I admired, the excitement I felt watching them create, and the respect I held for what they did, never flagged. I considered myself privileged to be present throughout the process of creation – from the project's conception to placement of that work on a wall. And even though I wasn't directly making the marks myself, I was in the middle of the conversation.

My time at the art studio taught me all about the contemporary art market. It taught me how to look at art, how to think about art and speak about art. It taught me how to work with other artists, all kinds of artists, and to live in the world of images and ideas.

Being an artist, I came to realize, is a journey that takes your whole life to travel. And we each take our own way there in our own time. No one artist's path is truer than another's.

Not everybody has the privilege of working in such a dynamic creative environment as I did. But you do have the opportunity to connect with introspection, inspiration, and knowledge wherever you are.

This feather is all about setting the course for your artist's journey because it's always important to have an intention. But we must remember that life always has the last word.

Didn't John Lennon famously say that life is what happens while you're busy making other plans? So, when real life gets in the way of the course you've set – allow. Allow.

Life happens. Our job is to be present for it, to deal with what's placed in our path. Children must be raised. Aging parents must be cared for. Money's got to be earned.

But that doesn't mean you have to leave The Art Club.

I don't have children and that was a conscious decision. But there are many artists who do. There are artists who mix parenthood and an art practice successfully. Maybe they see playtime as creative time? Maybe they're patient, and satisfied with baby steps? Maybe they just have more energy than the rest of us? I don't know.

But I do know that being an artist is a job. It's work. And there are people all over the world who mix work with motherhood and fatherhood.

I also know that no one ever feels they're doing it "right." It doesn't matter whether you put work aside to care for others or dedicate yourself to work and get help, almost all women (and a lot of men) feel uncomfortable with the balance.

It's all okay.

No matter what you choose, it's okay. If you must put art projects aside for a few years, that's okay. If you're able to make work at a slower pace, that's okay too. It doesn't mean you must stop absorbing inspiration.

Being an artist isn't so much what you do, as who you are. If you're showing up and being yourself, accepting what life is placing in your path right now, you'll be fine.

Just continue to create spaces for yourself. Carry a notebook or sketchpad or camera everywhere you go. Bring the energy of noticing into your life. Remember, artists are people who notice things.

Before you can fall forward, before you can fall into the flow of making important work and achieving goals, begin by falling forward into the flow of your life right now.

How Do You Prepare for the Journey if You Don't Know Where You're Going?

62

Spend wisely.

When I was selling art and not making art, I filled that empty space inside of myself with stuff. Lots and lots of stuff. I had a big house, crammed up to the attic with collections, books, handbags, clothes... stuff.

Oh sure, it was beautiful stuff. I loved it all. It felt meaningful. But my money, space and time was spent accumulating and supporting stuff.

And when you support other stuff, you aren't supporting your stuff. Art.

Everything is energy and energy is everything, money and time included. Spend yours wisely.

And remember that even though money is a currency, it's not the only currency. Creativity is a currency that's even more valuable than money. Ideas are important. They have value. Look around; everything you see began as an idea. Not as money.

Strive for a wealth of ideas and abundance of creativity.

Relationships are another valuable form of currency, especially in this new economy. Spend your energy on building your audience, making connections, and giving of yourself generously. And that includes finding a community of other artists who are seeking answers to the same questions.

Consider how you spend emotional energy too. Drama and shame will drain your creativity. Release them because they don't serve you.

And money?

Independent filmmaker Alain Robbe-Grillet, who directed the masterpiece *Last Year at Marienbad*, and he spent decades making only the films he wanted to make. When someone asked him how he was able to make such artistic works in a commercial field, he said that he always kept his budget to a strict minimum. He worked simply so that he could simply work.

Your lifestyle is your choice. Your possessions don't define you. Bells and whistles don't define you. More isn't better.

Travel light on this journey Artist, because the freedom it will afford you is priceless.

A package arrived from an old friend. On the enclosed card, she'd written, "Dear Crista, this is work by an artist who shows great talent. I think it's someone that you should pay attention to."

Inside, the framed graph was a picture that I myself had taken years before.

It's true. I'd lost touch with the artist I'd once been. I was focused on sales quotas, running the studio and gallery, supporting other people's ideas and creativity.

A few days later, I was having coffee with a friend who was complaining about his life. He was laughing when he said, "Don't you wish you could just sell everything you own and move to the south of France?"

And something inside of me whispered, "*Follow this...*"

But it was absurd! I had a big life, a big career. I had big debts and big responsibilities. People don't just move to France, you know.

That afternoon found me thumbing through an art magazine, but my thoughts kept returning to that question.

Don't you wish you could just sell everything you own and move to the south of France?

Many years before, I'd spent time in a tiny French village at an arts school for American students. I'd loved that village. I was in awe that people were allowed to live in a place so beautiful.

I remembered an American artist I'd met there. He was living in that village – so apparently some people do just move to France. I wondered how he'd made that happen? I tried to remember his name...

As I turned the page of the magazine, my heart stopped. Because there, right in front of me, was an article about Dan Adel, the very artist I had just been wondering about. The one who lived in that French village.

Follow this...

Now some people might laugh it off, and say it was just a coincidence. Those are the people who don't believe in magic. But I do believe in magic.

I knew that I was being called to jump.

FEATHER TWO. QUEST 3:

When you close your eyes and imagine true success, what do you see?

Is it the completion of a specific project? Is it attaining a level of recognition? Is it financial? Is it a matter of time devoted to your work? Write down the words that best describe your vision.

And now write down how it feels? How would this true success feel for you?

Maybe you'd feel free. Or more authentic. Or more powerful. Or connected. Or helpful. Keep an eye on the feelings associated with your vision of success. That's where the gold is.

How do you want to feel?

Feather Three: Facing Your Fears

There's nothing to be afraid of.

As you grow this feather, you'll look your monsters straight in the eye and name them so you can truthfully see what you're up against. You'll empower yourself through perception and presence. You'll learn to trust the whispers of your heart.

And then you'll start moving forward, from wishing to deciding to doing. Feather by feather Artist, your wings will grow. This is how it's done. You're on the right path.

The Stoic philosophers say that "the obstacle is the way." I believe that this is not only true, but also the key to success. Your obstacles themselves are pointing you in the right direction.

Follow this.

Look at your fears for example and listen to what they have to teach you; about where they come from, what they really want, and ultimately about who you really are.

This kind of inner work is crucial to artists. We don't overcome the obstacles by running away from them, but by listening to what they're here to teach us.

Our art is where we share what we're learning.

A Picture of Chocolate Syrup Mirrors Life's Greatest Lesson

Artist Vik Muniz recreates art history masterpieces with materials such as diamonds, garbage, thread, or even chocolate syrup, and then he photographs them.

What his work reveals is our ability to see only the chocolate, the sticky mess the masterpiece is made of, or the image itself. But it's impossible to see both at the same time.

In other words, we choose what we see, and we believe that to be the only story.

The question is: are you looking at the chocolate or the masterpiece?

Meet the Bad Guy

Every story has an antagonist. The story of your hero's journey is no different. An antagonist is an adversary, an opponent. It's what comes between the hero and their desire.

Consider your own story, where you are right now. Can you identify the antagonist? It could be a person but more likely, it's a habit or belief or challenge.

Who's the antagonist in your story?

I believe that if you look the antagonist in the eye, you'll see who it really is. It's the monster we call NOT ENOUGH.

Not perfect enough.

Not strong enough.

Something's wrong with me.

I'm not good enough!

But in any story, it's the antagonist who leads the hero to truth, to transformation.

As you travel this artist's journey, you'll find the monster named NOT ENOUGH wearing different disguises.

Don't be afraid.

The best way to claim victory over the monster is to question it. That's right: each time you find yourself doing battle with feelings of lack, let the sharp sword of your questions cut deep to the truth.

Ask the monster questions like: Whose voice are you speaking from? Is this my parents' voice, for example, or is it my own? What is the monster trying to protect me from? What is it afraid of?

The answers will arm you with courage.

Over the years of leading the art studio, I worked with many of my art heroes. One of my favorites was Native American artist Jaune Quick-To-See Smith. Her work touched me deeply, her ideas insightful and wise.

Whenever a visiting artist was in town to work with us, it was customary for me to take them to dinner. I was quick to invite Jaune because I was starstruck and thrilled to meet her.

That evening, the conversation with Jaune Quick-To-See Smith was utterly fascinating. Her unique insights into American culture, her understanding of history, and her own experiences in the art world had me riveted. I didn't want the evening to end.

The next night, I invited her to my home to continue our exchange.

At that time, I was at the top of my game. I was an international art dealer who'd placed work in nearly every major collection in the United States. I traveled every month, had closets full of little black dresses for all the big openings I went to. I hobnobbed with celebrated artists, curators, and notable collectors. People used to joke that they wanted to kill me so they could have my life.

But Jaune Quick-To-See Smith was quick to see that this glamorous life wasn't a true reflection of my creative soul.

As I prepared our meal, she slowly circled my house peering at the large art collection that covered my walls. Out of all the pieces displayed, she pointed out the photograph that my friend had sent me. The one that I had taken.

“Who took this?” she demanded to know.

“I did.” She looked at me through narrowed eyes.

As we sat down to eat, she fixed her direct gaze upon me from across the table. I was quick to see that she was serious.

“Your home reveals a lot,” she began. “There’s more to Crista than the job you now have.”

She twirled a forkful of pasta thoughtfully and asked: “What is it that you really, really want to do?”

BAM.

That was the very question that I’d been afraid to ask myself. This was the vision I kept my eyes closed to. Because privately, I was afraid that a part of me was starting to die.

I'd graduated from art school years before, but somehow life had swallowed me up and pointed me in a different direction. I was terrified to admit that I secretly yearned to be an artist again: to engage my own creativity and to step away from the world's version of success.

"You must, Crista," she said. "Anyone can see that."

It all spilled out; my secret desire to move to France, to start a new life as a writer and photographer. To get away from art as a commodity and to find a new way; a new Crista.

But it was just a silly dream, impossible! There was no way it could actually happen. "People don't just move to France," I told her.

"But I can see it," said Jaune Quick-To-See Smith.

And when I dared to look into those wise eyes, I could almost see it too.

When you jump, you find yourself moving between glee and terror. Between faith and anxiety.

The one thing that will ground you, will balance you, is to remain present. It sounds so simple. But all our fears are in the future, and usually about things we can't control or don't even yet know.

By being here now, you take your power back because this moment now is the only one that you can control. So, take control. Now. Forget the regrets of the past. Stop worrying about what may or may not happen tomorrow.

Be in this moment.

One of the best ways to return yourself to the present is to identify what you're grateful for right now. This small singular practice has enormous consequences that lead to positive change.

This is how you change your life. You don't start by changing reality. You simply focus on this moment, on what you do have, and you take the opportunity to choose your perception of where you are. It's important to continue to focus your energy this way.

The jump is about following your heart, and you can't do that when you're in a state of fear or lack. The jump is about daring to believe in yourself. That means learning to trust that small still voice when it whispers its desire.

Sometimes our hearts are quiet, and we don't know what we want. Stay the path! The questions you ask yourself on this journey will awaken your heart and guide you toward its answers.

When you can recognize your heart as the very best of yourself, and you acknowledge that this is where your creativity comes from, you'll learn to trust your heart to lead.

Don't confuse your heart with your head. The voices in your head are loud, your heart is quiet. You need to listen closely to hear it.

Your head is rational. Your heart sees the invisible and understands that logic is an illusion.

Your head carries the stories of your past. Your heart carries the wisdom.

When you follow your heart, you can trust yourself. But trusting yourself doesn't mean you're not going to fail. It means you're going to get back up.

The questions tumbled out as I searched for answers. What's my life purpose? Is there more to me than this? Maybe it's too late for me, have I missed my chance?

As an art dealer, I wore beautiful clothes, yet now they felt like someone else's. They felt stifling and uncomfortable. I yearned to do something different, something that mattered. And though I'd spent years moving in art circles and loving my job, now the work no longer felt important to me.

Was I just a malcontent? Unable to ever be satisfied? What was wrong with me?

Don't you wish you could sell everything you own and move to the south of France?

Yes! Ever since my friend said these words, this terrifying thought had staked its claim in my brain: I wanted this more than anything in the world. I wanted to move to the south of France – but there were a million reasons why this was a stupid idea. People don't just move to France, I told myself.

I was paralyzed by fear – and debt. I knew that I could never ever afford it. “Forget about France!” I instructed my brain sternly.

But my brain wouldn't listen, and then I heard my heart pick up the cry. “Move to the south of France.” I could almost imagine it...

Life began testing me.

Out of the blue, a well-respected New York gallery offered me a director position. This was it, everything an art dealer works for. I was congratulated – everyone so proud and confident in my future. "You're at the top of your game!" they assured me.

But the problem was that I didn't want to play anymore.

Should I fall back? The safety net was made of gold. My friends and family became exasperated by the drama. "Crista, take the job," they advised.

On the plane home from the interview, I started to cry. I confessed to my poor seatmate that my heart's desire was to move to the south of France and create a new Crista, one who becomes a working artist, writing and taking pictures.

"How exactly would you make money?" he asked. I didn't know.

But the stranger urged me to do the thing that scared me most. "Follow this, Crista." He said, "That's where you'll find the magic – on the other side of fear."

When I looked in the mirror, I saw my biggest problem. It was me. I didn't believe in myself. I was afraid that I was, in fact, Not Enough.

But it was time. Time to jump. Time to fall forward.

Career and money were wonderful opportunities, but I yearned to make my living by being ...
Crista. Isn't that what every artist yearns for? To be sustained by being oneself? In a world
where the word 'authentic' is used routinely, isn't this true authenticity?

But the monster roared: "You won't work well enough! You won't work often enough! There
won't be enough! And you will be lonely because you are Not Enough."

The Muse whispered in reply, "Yes, the artist's path is lonely but if you choose to walk with me,
you'll never be alone."

FEATHER THREE. QUEST 1:

Can you identify someone – perhaps an historical figure, a contemporary artist, or even a friend – whose life journey inspires you? Name someone who embodies courage and shows authenticity and the willingness to face their fears head on.

Who is this person for you?

What can you learn from their example?

How can you embody these qualities in yourself?

Fear stops artists from following their path all the time. I was determined that fear wouldn't stop me from moving to France, but the truth is that I was drowning in it.

Who moves to France? Who did I think I was to take this jump? What if I ruined my life? What would become of me?

I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I couldn't stop crying.

Exasperated after weeks of talking about it, my therapist put me on the couch and hypnotized me. There, in the depths of my trance, we saw that this fear had literally gotten into my heart and was now trapped there.

"What you need," he advised as I woke up, "is a shaman. Someone who can cut the fear out."

"Crap," I thought to myself as I pulled out of his parking lot. Where was I going to find a shaman?

Double crap! Thinking so hard about my dilemma, I'd turned right instead of left and driven nearly a mile the wrong way.

I was about to turn around when I saw him.

Standing at a bus stop was Andrew David Smith, my long-lost mentor and friend. I squealed to a stop and screamed "Get in the car! Get in the car!"

Andy's blind, so his first thought was that a crazy lady was kidnapping him. "No," I said, "it's just Crista."

As we drove, Andy caught me up on the past few years of his life since we'd last seen one another. But when he told me that he'd been living with a Native American tribe and studying to become a shaman, I pulled the car over to listen more closely.

He said that he'd recently completed a vision quest, living in the desert on his own and finishing the journey with the elders by forging his own knife. I knew that this was the knife he would use to cut fear out of my heart.

I told Andy that I needed his help, and he was happy to oblige. We took a week to prepare for the ceremony. I brought along a skeptical-but-curious friend who witnessed the entire process in awe as he could literally hear the cuts and swore that he saw a flash of light when the fear was finally released.

I was exhausted afterward, but we all went out for a big meal to celebrate.

The memory of that experience still rattles me. It was outside of anything that my mind could understand. I do know that when my therapist suggested that I find a shaman, it sounded like the most ridiculous advice I'd ever paid for.

But going the wrong way out of that parking lot and running smack into a shaman showed me that I was moving in the right direction after all.

ARTIST INTERVIEW:

I first met Andrew David Smith when I was 17 years old. Not only was he the first blind man I'd ever met, but he was also the first artist. He would become a spiritual mentor and guide.

I asked him what advice he might offer to other creative people, and his words were beautiful:

"Follow your heart.

When it comes to who you really are and what's coming out of your incredible unique soul – the expression, the creativity that's coming through your hands or your voice or the instrument you're playing or the book that you're writing – that's you.

Your only mission on Earth is to honor who you are. As long as you're doing that, the opinions of others, while useful, aren't that particularly important."

I didn't know what the future looked like. I didn't know how to use art to build a new life. I did know that I would do whatever it took to keep following this voice that was urging me to jump.

So I listened to my heart. In a giant leap of faith, I jumped.

I left my career and sold everything I owned. Every single thing.

I stripped my life down to two suitcases and moved by myself to the middle of nowhere in the rural French countryside. And I didn't speak French.

Was I scared?

Are you kidding? I was terrified. But my heart spoke louder than the fear.

Follow this...

Once you start following your heart, you're in. You can't second-guess the jump anymore. Direct your energy toward trusting yourself instead. And how do you trust yourself?

You be trustworthy. You show up when you say you're going to. You're always honest. You do the work. You have your own back and don't allow your head to beat your heart up.

This is where confidence comes from. It's an inside job because it begins with trusting yourself and knowing that it's the best part of you, your heart.

And when I talk about your heart, I'm not talking about romance.

Nestled between the H and the T in the word HEART is the word 'ear.' The symbol for a heart even resembles two ears together. One belongs to you and the other to The Muse.

FEATHER THREE. QUEST 2:

When you really listen, what is your hEArT urging you to do?

Can you allow yourself to open more to the messages of your heart, and create a feeling of expansion around your dreams? This allows for possibility and magic. Don't worry about the 'how,' just yet.

What's the message from your hEArT? Finish this letter by free-writing without judgement:

Dear Artist,

I am your hEArT and this is what I want to tell you:

Has Your Heart Ever Failed You?

This is life. We're never safe from being hurt. Never.

The harsh truth is that try as we may, we can't avoid pain. Many of us curse it. But I'm going to suggest that you try to use it.

The secret to success isn't avoiding tumbles, but in constantly searching for the gold each fall brings you as you get back up. Create meaning from each experience. For this is how you grow your wings so that you may fly.

Instead of gripping the memory of pain, can you identify the blessings it brought you?

Did you gain something from the experience? Self-knowledge? Wisdom? A new life? A new path?

Every setback holds a gift.

Stop Wishing! Start Doing!

Ever since I was a little girl, I'd wanted to be a writer and an artist. I wished on every shooting star, straining my neck from the constant upward gaze. I threw a small fortune of coins into wishing wells. My bad posture is from the persistent search for four-leaf clovers.

Imagine what life could be like if I wrote stories and made pictures?

Wishes exist to show you what's really possible, revealing what you're truly capable of achieving.

But you've got to turn the wish into a decision in order to do it. A decision moves the energy beyond wishing into action. A decision doesn't wait for the outside world to show you what you're made of. You show the world through your decisions.

A decision begins by taking a single step. What's a step you could take toward your wish?

Consider practicing the "little-teeny-tiny steps each day" philosophy because I've found that's how things get created most gracefully.

I've noticed that when people work this way, especially when it's in service to others, doors open. And the timing's always more perfect if you allow The Universe to work for you, instead of dictating your timeline.

Keep working. Start small and you'll do great things. Start now.

I was Lost in France

I went to France to be by myself but without my job, my stuff, and my people, I didn't even know who I was anymore. And it had taken such an enormous effort to divest myself of everything I owned that I'd never stopped to think about what would happen once I actually got to France.

While renting a car, I was asked my occupation. I panicked. It felt too soon to call myself a writer. And I couldn't call myself an artist, could I? The Car Rental Application Police might come after me!

So instead of falling forward, I fell back. I wrote 'art dealer,' even though every cell in my body was screaming, "That's not me!"

Funnily enough, my application was refused. "We don't rent cars to art dealers," the French rental agent sniffed.

"And I don't blame you one bit," I told him as I crossed out the offending words.

The 'ARTIST' got the car.

The Universe had spoken. From that moment on, I wrote 'ARTIST' on every application as I started my new life in France. I wore the badge proudly, owning my intention by stepping into it.

You Don't Have to Change Your Life

“But Crista!” you may be saying, “I can’t uproot my whole life!”

Listen, I'm not saying that you should sell your possessions and move to France (though I do highly recommend it!). What I am suggesting is that you begin asking deeper questions. In what ways can you live more creatively and authentically?

Listen to that small voice within. Don't doubt it and never mock it. Pose the questions and honor the answers.

If the answers scare you – and they might – don't run away. Be prepared to work hard but always move from a place that's authentically, deeply, and truly you. Take risks. Fall toward that which has heart and meaning.

“Don't fear failure,” Bill Jay once advised me. “Fear average.”

You have powerful tools at your disposal. Words, for example, hold tremendous power. They matter.

I can...

I am...

I know...

Banish the word 'if' from your vocabulary and replace it with the word 'when.'

It doesn't matter that you don't know all the answers yet. There's magical power in intention, and invisible energy behind your affirmation.

The world is in a world of hurt right now. And we won't find our way out of this pain by doing the same things or following the same people. It's creative thinking that will save the planet because we need new results, a new reality. Let it begin with you.

By following your creative urgings, you're part of the solution. You are saving the world.

So now it's time. Jump!

Whatever that means to you. Jump! Make the decision and take that leap.

FEATHER THREE. QUEST 3:

Let's take a breath here. I've been encouraging you to 'jump' for several pages now.

What does that look like to you? Does the jump look like a renewed sense of purpose for your work? Does it look like committing to an aspirational project? Or maybe it's about the way you make money?

No matter what it looks like, the jump signifies change – a strategy that starts on the inside. By engaging with these pages Artist, you've already undertaken the first steps toward change.

Now it's time for an action. Is there a little-teeny-tiny step that you can commit to taking now?

For example, if you want to jump into the world of gallery representation, a little-teeny-tiny step might involve spending some time online researching galleries in your region.

If your jump looks like writing a book, you might start by collecting your notes and ideas to draft a rough outline.

If your jump is about quitting your day job, your little-teeny-tiny step might be looking at your budgets and numbers. Maybe even hiring a coach.

What's a little-teeny-tiny step that you can take now? Name it and then commit. Do it.

I don't know about you, but over the years I've done a lot of deep dives into the world of psychotherapy. Freud, Jung, Gestalt, Reich: I've been on every couch. I've studied psychological modalities for my own education too.

Art and psychology have a long symbiotic relationship because artists are always exploring their own psyche. It's often part of the work.

Recently, I discovered the "Internal Family Systems." This psychotherapy method posits that each of us is really a collection of internal parts lead by a core Self.

It's this core Self that holds all our beauty, truth, and power. But it's the wounded parts within that often block that Self from stepping fully into its power.

Do you allow the wounded parts rule your choices? Or do you even muzzle those parts because of fear or shame?

In the Internal Family System method, we lovingly look at these wounded parts, shine a light on them, and give them the space to speak of their experience. We listen to their pain and help them to heal, to transform that pain into something more empowering. We can then connect with the core Self and give it permission to lead.

It's powerful and I've experienced profound shifts from engaging with this kind of work.

I like to think of the internal voice called Not Enough as one of these parts.

Can you think of where you have a Not Enough fear and engage with it?

Maybe you're afraid you aren't good enough, or young enough, or rich enough to achieve your dreams? Whatever is haunting you right now, let's listen to where it comes from and what it wants.

This is an extremely simplistic representation of a complex psychotherapy. It won't substitute for professional support but for myself, just the act of engaging with my inner Not Enough monster has opened the door to change some deep-seated patterns and beliefs.

The next time that your Not Enough monster raises its ugly head, could you engage with it by asking a few simple questions?

- Where did you come from? Society? My parents? A teacher?
- What are you trying to protect me from?
- What do you need to feel safe?
- How can we transform your energy from stopping me to empowering me?

Listen to what Not Enough has to tell you. Don't judge, there is no right or wrong in this work.

FEATHER THREE. QUEST 4:

Write yourself a letter from that part of yourself that you identify as Your Fear. Seriously! Don't think about it, just write what comes out. There's no way to do this wrong.

I've done this exercise myself several times at critical junctures. Though I felt awkward and unsure at first, I have saved all my letters from My Fear because they revealed themselves to be important to my journey.

For example, when I first had the idea of moving to France, I wrote:

Dear Crista,

I am Your Fear and this is what I want to tell you:

Are you out of your mind? You have a beautiful life and wonderful career.

I'm afraid that you're just a malcontent. You'll never, ever be happy and your search for fulfillment will destroy you. I'm afraid to trust you, to trust your emotions, to trust this crazy stupid idea of moving to France. I'm afraid that you're making a mistake.

But truth be told, I'm also afraid you're right. I'm afraid that the signs you see are true and that you are indeed being called.

But what the hell are we going to in France, Crista? You don't even speak the language! How will we live? How will you eat? You like to eat, you know.

I'm afraid of what we'd have to let go of if you went. Everything you have, everything you've built. Your family and friends. Who would you be without them? What if there's no coming back?

I know that you're trying to get rid of me, to make decisions without me. I know that you wonder who you could be if we broke up, if you lived without being dominated by Your Fear. I'm only trying to help, you know.

Love,

Your Fear

Now it's your turn to write a letter, quickly and without thinking too deeply, to yourself from your Fear:

Dear Artist,

I am Your Fear and this is what I want to tell you:

The blank page mocks me, its stark white surface daring me to commit to a word, a phrase, an idea. I take a deep breath and grip my pencil tighter. This is always the moment of truth – when despite all my experience, something deeper must take over.

All creatives know this precipice well, the place where craft meets risk.

Every great work of art is born from a leap into the unknown. The painter who stares at the empty canvas, the dancer poised before the stage, the visionary shaping the first clay model – all understand that their craft can only take them so far. At some point, the risks must be embraced: risking failure, risking criticism, risking that The Muse may never arrive.

Sometimes even risking success is terrifying.

The jump, taking that leap of faith, is rarely graceful and pretty. More often, it's messy and confusing. Kiki Smith confessed to me that choosing to be an artist felt like choosing to be in a freefall for the rest of her life. All of us who work with creativity understand exactly what she means. We are zealous risk-takers, doomed to put our untested visions and voices on the line and we dive into the deep unknown.

There are many challenges found on this path, and you might struggle from lack of resources, such as time or money. But in developing your craft, you learn how to mitigate certain risks. Craft becomes your safety net when you take those creative plunges. It may not prevent risks entirely, but it will ensure you make a softer landing.

Craft is born from practice, and practice demands time and discipline. We'll talk about discipline later.

The first feathers you'll grow on your art journey are about taking control of life's GPS so that you lead the way instead of blindly following what life's presenting you. That way is full of dead ends.

Even though a lot of artists allow themselves to be stopped by a lack of resources, it's often this lack of resources that turns out to be one of the critical elements for success. It's true! So, if you're struggling to find the time or the money, you can rest assured you're on the right path. Many great artists have struggled to overcome scarcity. It's how they transformed their feathers into wings.

I once watched a documentary film about female photographers in Iran. Could any artist have more constraints than these women? Repressive cultural rules, no finances, an extremely limited audience for the work. Yet still they persevered. And overcame. When put in perspective with those artists who risk their lives and their freedom to make art, our issues with time and money appear trivial.

A creator should never stop creating just because of scarcity. Creators create.

It's possible that from the moment you decide to be an artist, to write that book, to start taking pictures, to step on that stage, you will be immediately plucked out of the sky by a famous gallery or agent or patron; and your job will simply be to create masterpieces.

But in all likelihood, no one is going to just give you time and money to be an artist. And you're probably not going to find time and money in a trunk in the attic. Instead, you've got to make it.

So, never let money stop you. Simplify. Reuse and recycle. Barter. I've found that when I work this way, I receive exactly what I need.

For example, I've traded art for exhibition space, for materials, for a catering service, for someone's air miles. You do have the resources if you're resourceful. Kiki Smith said that when she didn't have any money, she made art on cardboard she found in dumpsters.

Start small if you must. Just start.

They say that they can't find the time to make art. They're just too busy.

The reality is that money, work, relationships, health, and home are just as important as your creativity. They do demand time and energy.

Notice that I said, 'just as important.' Not more important. Definitely not more important.

Create the time for your creative work and begin to put boundaries in place. It doesn't have to be huge chunks of time. But they must exist.

Other people will see those spaces and they will want them. They'll call them 'free time.'

But just because an artist's job happens to be more fun than their job, doesn't mean it's not important, that it's not work. It is crucial that you guard this time jealously. With no apology.

It's about creating the time to make, consistently and intentionally. It's about challenging yourself to make better, with each piece and every day.

It's not about money nor fame nor prizes nor shows. It's about developing your craft to the very best of your abilities and recognizing this as a lifelong adventure – a journey of constant discovery and growth.

Craft is mastering your tools, understanding your medium, knowing its history, and taking your work seriously. For instance, it's about knowing exactly how your chosen tool behaves under different conditions – whether that's a brush on canvas, a chisel on wood, or a digital stylus on a tablet. It's also about recognizing how artists throughout history have pushed the boundaries of these tools, and how their innovations have shaped your medium.

Craft demands time, learning, and commitment. It's the highest goal an artist can aspire to.

But goals are difficult. Goals intimidate us; they show us how far we have yet to go. This gap between where we are and where we aspire can be discouraging, even overwhelming at times.

Goals are carrots dangling on the stick of life, urging us forward. But when all we can see is how far we have yet to travel, we often quit.

Don't quit. Instead, recognize that goals set a course of direction.

The best way to achieve a goal is to create a system – a set of repeatable actions that bring you closer to your goal. To integrate little-teeny-tiny steps toward the goal into your daily routine, staying focused but also using the momentum of habit to move you forward. This turns the daunting mountain of 'mastering your craft' into a series of manageable, everyday climbs.

So, if craft is the goal, then the system is about creating the time in your routine to hone your craft: to learn, to practice, to experiment, perhaps to teach. Whatever commitment you have made to your practice, it's about showing up and doing the work.

Because working artists master their craft, and this is how it's done – not in grand, sweeping gestures, but in the quiet, persistent dedication to showing up and doing the work, day after day.

Is there a little-teeny-tiny step that you can take toward improving your craft?

Perhaps you need to prioritize a more consistent practice so it works with your schedule?

Maybe you could research courses about a new technique you've been wanting to master?

Or book museum tickets to study the great masters?

If you're an actor, you know that you learn from watching others perform. If you're a writer, you read. If you're a singer, you listen.

What's the little-teeny-tiny-step toward craft that you're going to commit to next?

My next little-teeny-tiny step is ...

Shhh! The Artist is Sleeping

Over the years we've known one another, I've had the privilege of watching artist Kiki Smith work in the studio many times. It's always an inspiration to witness the sheer dedication and focus she brings to her craft. This is an artist who wholly immerses herself in the process of creating, and it shows in the mastery she's achieved across multiple mediums.

I have a photograph that I treasure; it shows Kiki sleeping during a week-long studio residency in Atlanta, where we were wrapping up an ambitious art project.

Kiki had been toiling in the studio since 8 am that morning, working tirelessly through lunch without pause. As the afternoon drew to a close, she reluctantly left the studio, only to quickly change clothes before heading off to deliver a talk on her illustrious art career to a sold-out crowd at the High Museum of Art, which was hosting a retrospective of her work.

For the next several hours, I watched in awe as Kiki graciously met with adoring fans, signing autographs and smiling for endless selfies with strangers. We were then whisked away to a lavish dinner in her honor, surrounded by the city's art elite and patrons of the High Museum.

We stumbled out of the restaurant and into a taxi, exhausted. I was ready to call it a night, but Kiki had other plans. She instructed the driver to take us back to the studio.

It was there, at 2 o'clock in the morning, that I took a picture of the beautiful Kiki Smith, fast asleep on top of her drawing.

That night encapsulated the greatest lesson I've learned from Kiki: an artist's life is defined by work. It's an obsession. Because being an artist isn't merely what you do; it's who you are.

Let me be clear: Kiki doesn't maintain such a grueling schedule every day. But when a situation demands it, when the work calls for an unwavering commitment, she answers without hesitation. That's the hallmark of a true working artist – an individual who doesn't shy away from opportunities to delve deeper into their craft.

Yet, we all have our own rhythms, our unique creative practices and work habits. There is no single path or definitive schedule that suits every artist. The key is to remain attuned to the ebb and flow of your own energy, adapting your approach to align with the ever-changing currents of life.

Sometimes, like Kiki, circumstances will require you to give 300%. Other times, rest and rejuvenation will take precedence. The most rewarding creative journeys are those that strike a balance between passionate dedication and self-compassion.

What does it mean to have an “artistic practice?” To me, it's more than just making art – it's also about developing personal rituals and routines that feed the creative soul.

I walk every day as part of my practice. I call it My Artist's Walk. It's where I do my best work. Would you believe that I'm writing these words as I walk now? My feet are steadily pacing the path, one step after another, while my mind races ahead, composing these very words you're reading – my body in motion, my thoughts taking shape for you with each passing stride.

An artist's practice is a living, breathing thing – a spiritually resonant combination of craft, voice, and meaning. It's a sacred collaboration with the invisible.

Joseph Campbell, the celebrated scholar of mythology, claimed that the defining characteristics of a religion include ritual, symbolism, and myth.

What if we approach the rituals of our creative practice through that lens?

The rituals are the physical processes and habits you cultivate – your materials, your studio setup, the routines that put you in a creative flow state. For a painter, it may involve meticulously preparing canvases. For a writer, sharpening pencils and freewriting in a journal. For a singer, it's practicing the scales. Some creatives meditate or light candles or even dance to connect with The Muse.

Rituals have the power to be the lifeblood and incantations of your practice.

Symbols are the actual creative outputs – the words, images, sounds, or movements you craft. You create symbols to express your voice and vision as an artist. They're personal emblems imbued with profound meaning.

And the myths? Those are the narratives you weave – the hero's journey you're on as a creator, overcoming obstacles, facing demons, and continuously evolving. Your own creative mythologies provide language, cohesion and significance to your work.

To build a deeply resonant practice is to consciously tend to each of these aspects. It means not just showing up and going through the motions, but infusing intentional purpose into your routines, your craft, your process of creating symbolic works, and the overarching story you tell through your art.

I can still remember watching my blind artist friend Andrew David Smith as he would prepare to draw. He would reverently wipe the surface before laying down his paper. He would move his attention inward as he sharpened each colored pencil. He would take a moment to connect with his Muse. And only then would he allow himself to create.

I've since watched thousands of artists make art over the years. The practices that inspire me are akin to spiritual callings, creative rituals through which the artists source their most transcendent work.

Of course, developing a profound practice takes commitment. It means showing up, not just waiting for inspiration to strike, but actively cultivating it through engaging with your own meaningful rituals.

You'll certainly encounter setbacks, self-doubts, creative blocks. But if you treat your practice as a calling, you'll build the courage and resilience to work through those challenges.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T:

Every artist I know wants one thing above all else. We want our work to be respected.

But we must earn respect, and this is where I see a lot of artists fall short. They don't respect their work enough themselves to earn the respect of others.

How do you respect your work? You respect your work by doing it, by showing up. By learning to do it even better. By valuing it. By protecting it.

It takes discipline to develop a respectful practice.

Not everybody likes discipline. It's not always considered a nice word. It's something we all say we wish we had more of, yet some of us secretly recoil when we hear the word. Artists may be particularly allergic to discipline because it implies a lack of freedom.

Consider this fact: the root of the word 'discipline' is 'disciple.'

'Disciple' holds a completely different energy. To be a disciple of something means to follow it, to devote oneself to learning about and supporting it. If you could approach your practice with the energy of a disciple, a follower to your own Muse instead of a drill sergeant, you'll bring a much different energy to it.

Your work is your greatest teacher, as its disciple you show it your full respect.

Discipline, even doing those things we don't like doing, is an expression of devotion to your art. It's about respecting your own artform enough to do the work. This respect manifests in two distinct but interconnected ways: through your creative practice and your professional practice.

Creative Practice: This is the heart of your artmaking. It's about the process of creation, the development of your skills, and the exploration of your artistic vision.

Professional Practice: This is how you engage with the art world and share your work. It's about presenting your art, networking, and managing the business side of being an artist.

Both aspects require discipline and respect. Your creative practice fuels your art, while your professional practice ensures it reaches its audience and supports your career.

How can you show more respect to both aspects of your practice?

Are You Busy?

I used to run an art studio and gallery, and I was really busy. I mean like, really busy. When people asked me, “Hey, how are you doing, Crista?” My reply was always the same, “Busy.” Because I was!

But I started to get tired of hearing myself say it. And I didn’t like defining myself that way. Every time I said “busy,” my teeth would set on edge. I loved what I was doing, just not how I was doing it.

So, for my New Year's resolution, I took the word "busy" out of my vocabulary. I was not allowed to say *that word* for the whole year. By doing this, I was forced to connect with other people in a more authentic and truthful way.

I realized I had been using *that word* to keep people at arms-length. But in simply not using *that word* any longer as a descriptor of my life, I became more connected and less stressed out. Less ...you know, *that word*.

Stop using the word “busy” to describe yourself. We’re all busy – it’s not interesting nor is it helping you. Use your other words. Make them more meaningful.

Focus on your priorities and recognize when you are allowing yourself to be blocked.

In this life of an artist, there are many obstacles that will try to stop you. Never let that obstacle be yourself.

Because the truth is that if you're too busy to make art, if you're too busy to honor your calling, if you're too busy to bring meaning to your exchanges and your work, you're just too ... busy.

Can you be a better gatekeeper of your creative time?

Maybe you need to formally schedule it, treating it as preciously as client meetings or family obligations.

Perhaps your life only allows for taking chunks of time sporadically – if so, get intentional about planning inspired creative vacations to go fully inward. I’m doing that as I write this book: I’ve taken time and space to be alone with my Muse and no one else.

Whenever and however it happens, guarding your creative time jealously is a radical act of self-preservation. Without apology or guilt, choose to protect those sacred pockets of space and silence. Let nothing – and no one – infringe upon that.

If you’re having trouble guarding your time, promise yourself now: I will become a better gatekeeper of my time by:

I draw so badly, in fact my scrawl is so childish, that it's worth millions.

Let me explain: Companion was working on an assignment to design a glamorous fund-raising event for schools in Africa. A worthy cause to be sure.

He wanted to show drawings that were made by African children during the event; these drawings would illustrate what the kids wanted to be when they grew up. He was hoping that sharing their dreams like this would inspire people to donate money.

He had a contact who was going to connect him with a school in Africa, but it didn't happen before the presentation of his pitch.

Because he was pressed for time, he asked me to get out of bed at 4 in the morning and make pictures of what I want to be when I grow up. "After all," he said. "You draw like a child."

It's true. I make a childish scrawl look ... well, childish. I have not mastered the craft of drawing.

I spent two hours sitting on the floor of a freezing basement, drinking lashings of hot tea, and drawing pictures of what I imagined an African child might want to become if given the opportunity. A teacher. A doctor. A police officer. An artist...

"No, not an artist," Companion edited that one from the collection. "No one will ever believe that kid's going to be an artist."

I didn't take offense.

But imagine his horror when he saw my drawings being projected on the elegant walls of the fundraising event! Someone had made a mistake and used my images instead of replacing them with the proper children's drawings.

At the glitzy black-tie fund-raiser, Hollywood A-listers and British pop stars descended upon a small Arab state where the glittering event was held. There, my drawings were projected on a large screen throughout the evening.

The sophisticated audience was so moved by my bad drawings that they donated millions of dollars to the charity! The event was a huge success.

No one realized that these stick figures of policemen and teachers and engineers were made by a woman of a certain age with very poor draftsmanship.

Nobody meant to misrepresent the work – the truth just got lost in the shuffle. Companion was mortified. In fact, he'd be furious if he knew I was telling you this story. But in the end, my inability to draw, which has always been my greatest shame as an artist, turned out to be for a good cause.

Because I may be an artist who can't draw, but my work is worth millions.

Every artist must pay their dues while they develop their craft. No one gets a free ride. I spoke about this with celebrated playwright David Adjmi:

“In the beginning, it's not going to feel good. You need to give yourself years. It's like a teacher of mine said: it's not a sprint. It's a marathon, and you have to commit to it even when you get nothing back, nothing. You just have to say to yourself, okay, I'm going to give myself five years, and then give yourself an ultimatum.

You have to do it like that because it's going to feel like crap every day, every single day. You have to sit down, you have to try to do something, you don't know what the hell you're doing. No one's asking you for your work, no one knows who you are, no one cares if you make your work or not, and you have to perforate a little hole in the universe and be like, here I am.”

They say, "It could take years to get any recognition! I could be 40, 50 or even 60 years old before I have any real success!"

And I reply that with any luck, you'll be 40, 50 or 60 years old anyway. What do you want to show for it? What's the journey you want to look back on?

Never give up on something because it's going to be difficult. The best things in life don't come easy.

Just show up. Just do the work.

People always ask me what it was about that French village that first made me fall in love with it. Was it the landscape? The food? The wine?

And I tell them, it was the women. I fell in love with the women.

You see, the very first time that I went to that village years before, I was already old. Even though I was young in years then, I was old. Physically, I was out of shape. Mentally and creatively, I was in a rut. Emotionally, I was in a relationship that left me dead inside.

I thought that this was how it was meant to be. I believed that compromise was the trajectory of life, that growing up meant that I'd relinquish more and more of myself as time continued, while outwardly I would accumulate more and more.

Isn't that the story we're told?

But when I first arrived at that Provençal village, I encountered a group of women who were much older than me. Yet they were young.

Boldly sovereign and tremendously brave, they had fascinating lives. And even though they lived in a tiny village, they were well-aware of what was happening on the planet politically, historically, and culturally. Their world was bigger than where they lived, and they participated in that world.

They were readers, interested in everything. Their minds were sharp and open and youthful. They were creators: artists and writers and musicians. They took joy in making work and sharing it.

Their bodies were fit and strong from active lives, walking and climbing and living without the comforts and ease of the modern world. They preferred the rigors and simplicity of country life. They spent time in nature and were connected to spirit in a way that deeply moved me.

They didn't collect gadgets nor yearn for fancy clothes and houses. They were content with the minimum. They were also devoted to their community.

I remember thinking that I wanted to be like them when I grew old. I wanted to be young.

Artists are curious people. Curious-strange, yes. But curious-enquiring too. Artists follow the questions. We learn from the answers. And repeat.

We're endlessly inquisitive. That's why it's often so difficult to focus on one – one medium, one idea, one style, one brand. I've heard artists scream in protest, "I don't want to choose one! I want to explore, learn, grow, play, experiment, try! I don't want to choose one!"

I suggest you choose one.

Choose one thing to focus on in your work at a time. It can be one medium, one idea, style, or brand. Experiment all you want but emphasize one area.

For example, if you want to work on honing your voice, then zero in on one idea and carry it through all you do. If you want to focus on developing craft, then concentrate on one style or technique. If your aim is professional advancement, then emphasize learning the business of art.

If you want to wildly chase The Muse, then by all means allow yourself that space to dance with abandon. But in that space where you're ready to grow, you need to choose one.

Focusing on one thing, be it craft, subject, or media, isn't just for your benefit as a maker. It's also for your audience. It's for your sales. It's for your reputation.

It's difficult to share your message when you're putting out mixed messages.

I like to use the artist William Wegman as an example. If you don't know his name, I'm sure you know his work. William photographs his Weimaraner dogs and has made a massive career out of doing this for over 50 years.

He's had licensing deals worth millions. He's had dozens of books and catalogues published. He's got galleries around the world and has shown his pictures of dogs in nearly every major museum internationally. He has developed a stellar blue-chip art career that he created with his dogs.

Let me ask you a question. Do you think William Wegman graduated from art school thinking, "I am going to photograph my dog every day for the rest of my life, and I will become rich and creatively fulfilled"? The answer is no. He did not.

The truth is, William is painter. He's a very talented one at that and is passionate about the medium. He also liked photography.

At the start of his career, he played around with shooting pictures and making short films with his Weimaraner dog because he was curious and wanted to explore the craft of photography.

He thought his photographs were interesting and funny. At the time, some of the art galleries were starting to show photos. He thought he'd try to submit a few.

Other people thought his photos were interesting and funny too. And he happened to be at the right places at the right time. The work took off.

William had been a young struggling artist, but the dog photographs were suddenly in demand. He told me that he rode the wave for a while, but then he got freaked out.

He was a classically trained painter. He'd graduated from a good art school. He wanted to make work that made important social and political commentary. What was he doing selling pictures of his dog?

Some of his contemporaries got jealous – as contemporaries often do. They started to dismiss him as 'The Dog Guy.'

Do you know what he did?

He quit. He quit doing the thing that was making him money because he was afraid of what other people would say.

He went back to struggling to get his work out there. He had some success, but it wasn't the same.

He told me that it was his Weimaraner dog (and if you know your art history, William Wegman's first dog was named Man Ray). The dog named Man Ray kept pestering Bill to take his picture again.

Bill realized that his dog was teaching him a lesson.

So, Bill went back to photographing Man Ray and devoted his focus to exploring this one subject as deeply as he could. He used the dog to explore all the social and cultural issues that interested him as an artist. And also to explore the craft of photography and film until he became a master.

He realized that this work would afford him the time to do the painting and other creative work unrelated to dogs. William Wegman's paintings are wonderful, but they don't put food in the dog bowl the same way that the photographs do. Yet he enjoys painting and shows it proudly.

He's built a massive career that allows him to have a satisfying love affair with painting with no pressure or expectations.

Does he curse the camera or the dogs? Does he allow himself to feel trapped? Not at all. He focused on one thing. His dogs. (What a fun thing to focus on!)

If you want to thrive as an artist and take your audience along for the ride, focus by choosing one.

FEATHER FOUR. QUEST 4:

124

Where can you choose ONE and focus? Will it be your style? Your medium? Your subject matter? Or even something else... what's your ONE?

I Remember that Moment

Even though I'd been in France for a few months by that time, I still didn't know where I was.

I looked down across the valley below where the French landscape was a stunning pallet of autumn's golden reds. Did the landscape hold the answers? I had so many questions.

"What now?" I cried out to the trees and the rocks. "I'm lost! I own nothing. I've closed all the doors behind me. For what? Where am I going?"

Suddenly, it was as if my eye moved from the chocolate to the masterpiece of a Vik Muniz photograph. I stopped trying to look into the future and instead I saw right now.

I was in France. I really did it! How could this even be?

The truth is, once I decided to jump everything worked out. I'm not saying it wasn't difficult; it was excruciating to say good-bye to my family and friends, my possessions, my whole life. The loneliness and fears were almost unbearable.

But I'd lucked into an incredible housesitting gig in the very village I'd wanted to return to. I'd renewed my passion for hiking and reading, and I'd even picked up my camera again.

About a month after I arrived, I discovered that two friends were staying in the village too. We'd met many years before when we were all at the art school for American students. And

for some bizarre cosmic reason, we'd each felt compelled to return years later. To the same tiny French village. At the same time. Swear to God.

But I was still impatient for answers. Why was I here? When do I find my purpose and write my happily-ever-after?

The landscape sighed, "*Follow this* doesn't mean you dictate what happens next, Crista. *Follow this* means the path will lead you where you need to go. Trust it."

Slowly, I learned that the best way to trust The Muse is to begin trusting The Muse. To do those things you have to do to connect with Her on a deep level. Introspection. Inspiration. Knowledge.

Follow this...

FEATHER FOUR. QUEST 5:

Write one paragraph, maybe more, where you talk about your art journey through your craft.

You can consider questions such as:

What's the lineage of your craft? Have you studied with a teacher?

What artists before you do you admire in terms of their craft?

What are you most drawn to in terms of craft?

Have you been recognized for your craft with any awards, publications or mentions?

Every artist has a unique voice and connecting with it is the greatest treasure you'll receive on your creative journey. Your voice is that important.

Your voice is the culmination of your ideas, vision, experience, and the wisdom that comes from it. Your voice is the story your art tells in the ideas it conveys. It's your own private language. No matter your art form, it shines from your work and makes it inextricably yours.

But your voice isn't just something you'll trip over and claim. Instead, it reveals itself slowly as you work, grow, and learn. It transforms as you yourself transform. So be patient with yourself as you learn how to connect with your voice.

It will come, I promise.

Artist Interview:

Sculptor Gabriel Sobin is the son of celebrated poet Gustaf Sobin and painter Susanna Bott.

Gabriel admits that he was spoiled to have parents who were artists. Their table was always full of visiting friends with conversations about art, literature, and nature.

But that also gave him a unique challenge. His father's success set the bar high. Gabriel had to ask himself, "How do I find my own language?" He said he struggled. He had to find his own way to his voice.

Gabriel said:

"It's very personal and it's unique to each human being, how his story unfolds and how he finds his way. But if it's there, it's there; and you don't have a choice."

I've spent my career surrounded by great artists, photographers, writers, and poets. People whose names are known and works celebrated; others equally talented who remain unknown.

Most artists have been lovely to work with, though there have been a few who were not-so-lovely. Yet something always told me to pay attention, to listen and learn. I considered myself an apprentice. After all, apprenticeship has a long-honored tradition in art.

No matter what role I was playing in the relationship with these artists, whether I was collaborating in the studio, curating their exhibitions, or selling the art itself, I always felt that my true work was to accumulate knowledge and experiences so that I could one day share them.

Share them with you, as it turns out.

Someone once told me that no one should be allowed to teach until they're 50 years old and they've acquired enough knowledge to have something to say. It's an extreme view, but one with some legitimacy. And it may be true of artists as well.

It can take a lifetime to master a medium. Art is about learning to see, creating a vision, developing craft, acquiring the wisdom necessary to infuse the work with meaning.

For it's only when one has ideas of value that the medium becomes truly important.

Master your medium, yes. But remember that craft without personal expression is just a beautiful object, and there's nothing wrong with that. But it's your unique perspective and experiences that breathe life into your work. They're the intangible elements that transform craft into art and resonate with us, your viewers, on a deeper level.

The best art reflects a vision, and that takes a lifetime to learn.

An artist's practice is an exercise in reaching repeatedly for the fruits of this tree. Sometimes feasting on success, other times starved by failure.

But you never stop reaching. Never.

This is the wisdom that great artists have shared with me.

FEATHER FIVE. QUEST 1:

132

What's an important lesson that another artist has taught you?

Craft is the 'How' of Art and Voice is the 'Why'

Your work will guide you, enlighten you, and form you. Your work is where you ask the questions and discover the answers.

I like to think of the artist as shaman, moving between seen and unseen realms. She works to make sense of the world for herself, her society, and for future cultures. Like a beautiful time capsule, art is how the story of our time gets told.

Art makes us human.

Both craft and voice take deep time and focus to develop. So be patient. Just because you put pen to paper or brush to canvas doesn't mean you're ready to share your work with the world. It does mean that you're on the right path.

Don't rush to turn it into money, to turn pro. Remember, your art doesn't exist to support you. You exist to support your art.

If you're an amateur and right now you're not marketing or even selling your work – that doesn't mean you don't have talent. The term 'amateur' refers to someone who's engaged with something. It doesn't mean you're not good, Not Enough.

Talent comes from commitment and intention, not money.

I love the word “intention”. It's so powerful on every level. It's the energy that we carry each time we bring a creation forth. Nothing happens without intention, and with intention, anything can happen.

The American Heritage Medical Dictionary defines the word “intention” as the process by which a wound heals. Isn't that lovely?

If you commit to intention, to using your work to heal the wounds of yourself and your world, asking questions and listening for answers, it will lead you to your own language: your voice. It's in this way that making art is a process of self-discovery.

The work itself becomes a vestige of that exploration.

When I sold art, I collaborated with a lot of artists who were making social or political commentary. Those artists were interested in their work inspiring deeper thought, questioning cultural norms, and ultimately, inciting change.

Other artists make work that's designed to be peaceful or soothing or joyful. Some want to entertain. Still others want to bring environmental issues to the forefront.

And remember, if your work is simply about "beauty," that's enough. In fact, it's beautiful.

What impact do you want your work to have on the world?

There are several things that artists can do to find their own language and nurture it. In fact, these practices are included in the routine of most of the working artists I know:

#1 Journal. Sometimes we don't know what we really think until we write it down. Journaling helps us to connect with ourselves in a deeper and more authentic way than any other tool available. Whether you choose to journal in words, snapshots or by sketching pictures, make it a point to do it.

#2 Look at other art. Lots of it. Both historical and contemporary. If music is your medium, put on your headset and dive deep. If you're an actor, the same advice holds. Wherever you go, make it a point to spend time in front of other artists' work. Nothing informs your own work more.

#3 Read. Art is the communication of ideas. Even if the idea is as simple as beauty, it still deserves your full attention. Learn everything you can about your field, its history, your medium, your subject, your technique, your market, your business. Never stop learning.

And remember, even if you struggle with reading, the world of ideas isn't closed to you. Today there's a huge range of resources available to access the world of thought. Podcasts, audiobooks, online videos and courses. This is the age of accessible information.

If you begin with these tasks, you'll find yourself engaging with your creativity more deeply. Your ideas will flourish. Your work will connect with others in a more meaningful way.

When you seek inspiration, it will come. The Muse will come. Your voice will come.

Let's face it; there are no two words more frightening to an artist than the words "Artist's Statement." But no matter how frightening it may be, The Artist's Statement is vital. And yes, even if you're not a visual artist, this is something you'll want to have.

So take a deep breath, grab your favorite pen, and let's dive into the beautiful mess of your creative mind. Your future self (and your audience) will thank you for it.

The Artist's Statement is important enough to get right. In my experience, it can be the best sales tool you have.

The Artist's Statement is one page – never longer. It's written in the first person – me, mine, I. It's a short personal statement. Think of it as your voice on paper.

The Artist's Statement can relate to a piece of work or a body of work. It can even relate to all your work. That's why you want to learn how to write statements, because you'll use this skill a lot.

The Artist's Statement can be about anything really, so long as it relates to your work. It can explain your technique, it can share your inspiration or ideas, it can point out features within the work, it can point out the thread that sews your work together, it can tell a story. It can even be a poem.

The point is that it helps the viewer to connect to the work.

It teaches people how to look at your stuff or read your stuff or hear your stuff. Like I said, even if you're not a visual artist, you still want to have a statement. It's content for your website.

A lot of artists say to me, "My work speaks for itself." But it doesn't. We would all love to believe that our viewers are as artistically literate as we are. But the truth is that they are not.

Even professionals like to read The Artist's Statement. I know I do.

When I was selling art, my success most often came from the story I told the client about the piece. I was giving them what was essentially an Artist's Statement. I was helping them to connect with the work through meaningful words that inspired them to look at it more deeply.

Here are a few secrets to help you can glide toward Artist Statement success more gracefully:

Secret #1 Always keep a notebook and pen on hand, especially while you're working. And next to your bed. Words, phrases, songs, ideas, constantly pop into your head. I want you to capture them. Even if it's just on your phone, get into the habit of capturing words that connect to your work in any way.

Secret #2 Try to look at your work while you're writing your Artist Statement. That helps to keep it real by getting you out of your head and into your heart.

Secret #3 If you get overwhelmed at the sight of a blank page, just write words and phrases. Be messy. Almost everything I write begins with pages of scribbled words and half-thoughts, and then I craft. And craft. It's a process.

Just keep moving these captive ideas together in different ways until they best express your intentions. It's a beautiful mess but you can bring order to it. It just takes time and patience.

Secret #4 Ask yourself questions and then answer them as honestly and simply as possible. Go through all the main interrogatives: who, what, where, when, why and how.

Secret #5 When you've finished, find someone who enjoys reading. Ask them if your Artist's Statement makes sense? Is it clear? Ask them to point out any questions or problems. Don't hear that as criticism but think of it as interesting. Proceed accordingly.

Secret #6 Repeat. Because you don't just write one Artist's Statement, if you're a visual artist, you'll be writing them throughout your career. By making it a part of your working artist practice, you'll become skillful at it.

So, get that notebook! Start capturing your ideas and then use your own words to talk about your work in a way that feels meaningful and true.

FEATHER FIVE. QUEST 3:

Jot down 25 things that you might include in your Artist Statement.

Be messy. Don't worry about fully formed ideas – just write 25 words or phrases that make sense to you as it relates to what you've done, what you're doing, and what you want to do in terms of your creativity.

You might write some words around why you do this work and include words that describe how you do it too.

You might turn to poetry or song lyrics or your journal for inspiration.

Look back at the quests you've already completed in this book. There's gold there.

I find it very powerful to be looking at the artwork itself as you write. If you're not a visual artist, spend time with what creative work you've made.

Remember, your work does not speak for itself. That's a myth. Your job as the artist is to help people to understand what your work is saying. In words. And you know your work better than anyone.

Begin with creating a list of 15 to 25 words or phrases that speak to you in regard to your creative work and spirit.

When I finally stumbled into that ancient French farmhouse, the enormity of what I'd done caught up with me. I had no job. No identity. No idea of what my future might be. I was terrified.

That first morning, I couldn't even get out of bed. I hid under the covers and told myself that I had the flu.

The truth is – I had a hangover.

I was so scared. It was cold and dark, I had to google 'how to build a fire' and shivered through every failed attempt. I was all alone in a foreign country with nothing to my name but a budding dream, two suitcases and apparently, a bottle of wine.

And now that was gone.

I did eventually get out of bed. I did start asking questions and learned to listen for the answers. I realized that the answers were, in fact, all around me – if I followed the signs.

Every day held the opportunity to make new choices. I knew that the road I'd taken before was no longer the right path. I promised myself that I would fall forward, not back. This was a promise that I would break.

But I started writing. I rediscovered my love of photography. I hiked through forests, getting lost and finding my way. I learned how to build a roaring fire. I became self-sufficient.

I taught myself Photoshop, video editing, and computer coding. I learned about copywriting. I read voraciously.

I already had an incredible wealth of art-world experience behind me to draw on, and this gave me some measure of confidence. That's why the first feather in the book you're reading was about owning who you are and taking inventory of what you've done. It's always the best place to start.

So, that's where I began.

And as I looked forward to set my course, I could see that in this new global market, every creative entrepreneur needs to develop their own audience. I started using Facebook to build mine.

I didn't know where I was going but the questions were leading me closer to the answers. They always do.

FEATHER FIVE. QUEST 4:

Are there real-world skills and tools that you'll need to acquire for the journey in front of you?

Perhaps you need to build a website? Or create a social media presence? Or edit video?

List any skills or tool you might need here:

Art is communication and your creative voice has value.

Though we find ourselves in the so-called 'Communication Age,' never has there been greater need for true communication, for understanding, for ethics-driven principles.

Art brings human values back to the conversation in a world that too often reduces everything to its economic value.

I once worked with a South American artist whose family had to flee the country as he faced down armed soldiers because of work created in our studio and posted online.

Autocratic regimes have always been threatened by art. They still are.

This is a time of opportunity for artists. Not only do more avenues exist to share your work and spread your message than ever before, but your voice and sensibilities are able to serve.

This is a time for artists to lead and your voice is your most important tool. Without a voice, you won't go far but with a voice, you can incite change.

I understand that it's also a scary time. But know that artists throughout history have boldly risen to the challenge, and we shall too.

Don't be afraid. Don't make yourself small. Don't allow the world to muzzle your voice. Instead, use your creative voice to speak out about what it is you feel called to say.

The world is undergoing expansive change in record speed. This is history unfolding. Right here. Right now. And you are at the center of it.

It's your artistic voice that gives you the language to heal the world. And it starts by using your work to heal yourself.

If you want change, you must make that change happen. You must be that change. You must commit to the tasks at hand, to making work of value, and to sharing it with a wider audience.

This is how artists will save the world.

Follow this...

A Girl Walked into a Bar...

I was that girl. And the bar was in London where I was spending a weekend away. I'd planned to meet an old friend. He was late. I was early. While waiting, I began a conversation with The Charming Man standing by the bar.

It was a great conversation.

Before my friend arrived, The Charming Man asked me to dinner. I declined. "I live in France, and I leave tomorrow." I explained. "If you wanted to take me to dinner, you'd have to come to France." He did.

Then he began visiting me often.

Once, as we were sitting in a café that overlooked the stunning French landscape, The Charming Man said, "I understand why you came here, Crista. This place is your soul – beautiful and wild."

That's when I fell in love with The Charming Man.

Our long-distance love affair bloomed but several months later, my time in France was drawing to a close. I had my return ticket for the flight home, but I didn't know what to do with it. Should I fall back?

The Charming Man invited me to live with him in England. We could be Life Companions. “But it won’t be easy,” he confessed.

He lived in a tiny parochial town. His house was very small. He worked long hours and had a three-hour commute to and from London each day. He often travelled. Most weekends were spent with his children – and I would not be invited.

“You’ll be lonely,” he admitted.

I was understandably concerned. I felt pulled to fall forward, into the adventure of living in England to companion with this Charming Man. But my money fears burned hot, and I had a raging case of Not Enough.

“Let’s face it,” I chided myself, “I’ve followed this for nearly a year now and what do I have to show for it financially? NOT ENOUGH!”

Should I fall back and return home? Even after all this time, there were still job opportunities waiting for me. Not to mention comforts like tumble dryers and decent coffee. I really missed my family and friends.

But if I fell forward, if I moved to England with a charming man I’d met in a pub, I might fail completely. I had no professional contacts in England. I was almost out of money.

“But,” The Charming Man smiled, “you have something even more valuable. You have creativity. France taught you who you are and what you want to say with your work, Crista. Take a leap of faith,” he urged. “take a leap of faith in your Self.”

So, I took his hand, and I jumped.

FEATHER FIVE. QUEST 5:

Return to your list of 25 topics for your Artist Statement. Review the artwork itself or, if you're not a visual artist, review what creative work you've done and what you want to do.

Now it's time to write The Artist's Statement. Take a breath, you've got this.

Let's start by moving these captive ideas together in different ways until they best express your thoughts. Weave your list of words and phrases. It's a beautiful mess but you can bring order to it. Look for links. Find connections. It just takes time and patience.

Ask yourself “why” questions and answer them as honestly and simply as possible. Use this language to tell a story of your work, we all love stories. This is how you start to give it structure.

Then start to strip it away. That's right, be ruthless.

Do you repeat yourself? Cut it back.

Are you going on and on and on? Streamline it.

Is each idea supported? Make sure every thought is grounded.

Cross out all the words that smack of academic art-speak. They won't serve you and you have no one to impress.

This is a practice, and practice makes perfect – not stressing over it.

By keeping a notebook around, writing in your phone, or even making voice memos, you're always able to capture words and inspiration about your work. Eventually, writing The Artist's Statement will become a more comfortable part of your practice. And you'll prosper as a direct result of leaning into it.

If you'd like to receive an eBook created by Working Artist alumni, sharing their Artist Statement tips, visit my website for the free download. You'll love it.

It's by the very act of engaging with the lessons of this journey that you build confidence.

The biggest enemy of confidence is again, that monster NOT ENOUGH. It's that inner demon that screams its warnings and accusations. But doing the work silences the monster, allowing self-assurance to have the floor.

This feather teaches you how to nurture and protect yourself, because people who don't have self-confidence will often see yours and they'll try to take it.

Refuse to give it to them.

Guard your confidence like a precious resource. Be selective about who you share your dreams with – not everyone deserves a front-row seat to your journey. Protect your time and energy by setting boundaries. Learn to say 'no' to commitments that don't align with your goals. Surround yourself with those that uplift you.

And remember, just as you wouldn't let a stranger waltz into your home and rearrange your furniture, don't let casual critics rearrange your self-worth. Your confidence is your sanctuary – be mindful of who you let in.

Let's face it, in the art business you will meet with judgements, criticism and rejection. It is what it is and the only way to avoid it is to never share your work. That's just not an option.

Confidence is often at the top of the list when artists talk about their challenges. And why wouldn't it be?

Is there anyone whose work makes them as vulnerable as artists? We're constantly taking risks and putting the most personal parts of ourselves out there publicly for the world to judge in ways that others don't have to. That's why confidence is such a challenge.

But confidence is vital.

Confidence is choosing the energy you bring forward. By choosing to show up fully, by choosing to act as if you already own confidence and not seeking approval from others, everything will change. You will change. And the way people respond to you will change.

Confidence is an inside job that connects the best of you with the outside world. What could possibly be wrong with that?

But understand that confidence isn't a window that opens every day, either. Nobody, and I mean nobody, feels confident all the time. The best you can aim for is most of the time.

The secret is in keeping the Confidence Tank full.

The Artist's Journey is full of doubts and anxieties. The inner critics – and the outer – love to drink confidence, and they aim to suck your Confidence Tank dry. Don't let them!

Be careful whose opinions you allow in. You're solely responsible for your own Confidence Tank, so look for ways to fill it and guard it.

How do you know when your tank is low? Your confidence will be low.

How can you fill your tank? That's a great question.

Follow this...

FEATHER SIX. QUEST 1:

What are some of the things that nourish you as an artist? List 5 to 10 things that make your Muse feel alive.

How can you bring more of this into your creative practice?

Kiki Smith is a creative force of nature. She's won accolades from the U.S. State Department Medal of Arts to Time Magazine's 100 people who shape our world. She works in mediums such as sculpture and printmaking but also tapestries and perfumes. Kiki is always making, and her level of craft is excellent. She's earned her confidence.

When we spoke about how artists can survive the constant challenges, Kiki said:

"I think it's very painful and difficult to learn to that your work is separate from you. To separate if someone reacts to your work or doesn't react to your work. Because it has nothing to do with you or the inherent value of your work in any way. It just has to do with how things fit to other people's interests, expectations, tastes.

"There are different reasons why people are attracted to things, and it's just about them. It's not a reflection on you."

In other words, Kiki is telling us that our value doesn't depend on what others think of our work. Her success shows that following your own path can lead to great things. Her words remind us that the most important thing is to keep creating and expressing yourself, no matter what anyone else thinks.

Art historian Harold Rosenberg said that "the real job of an artist is to make an artist."

So, what would happen if you acted as an artist with confidence? Because it's not about whether you succeed or fail. It's about the kind of person you become as you do the work.

When people don't like your stuff bless them and move on. Don't try to please everybody.

Meet people where they are. They have their own life experiences, their own education and agenda. Respect that everyone sees the world through their own lens. Don't try to convince people or explain yourself. Show them instead!

Do those things you say you want to do. Decide, and then be that decision.

Are there going to be obstacles? Most likely, yes. Will they cause anxiety for you? Most likely, yes.

But here's the thing: Anxiety is a choice, an ugly passenger that you've allowed to grab a free ride on your journey. Anxiety gives voice to those things that could go wrong. It screams Not Enough!

Consider this: What if that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy? What if every time you gave voice to your fears, you were making them more real?

What would happen if you chose faith instead?

Make the artist you want to be. This is your work. Let nothing stop you.

I was living in a tiny house in England where I worked hard to pursue my dreams of writing and making photographs. The Charming Man had become my Companion, and I was his.

He'd been right in predicting that I would spend most of my time alone. I sat by myself at a makeshift desk in our cold dark basement, and I wrote.

I wrote all day. I wrote every day. For a couple of years.

I committed to submitting or pitching or applying once each day. Twice each day, I was rejected – which seemed mathematically impossible – but that's how life feels while artists pay their dues. We simply must push forward, there's no other way.

With each rejection, it felt as if the monster Not Enough was winning. But the only way he could really win was if I quit. So, I didn't quit.

There are many ways to make money from writing and photography and I tried them all. I said yes to every opportunity, often working for free to get my foot in the door while chasing that elusive dream of “good exposure.”

I took commissioned pictures and made portraits. I wrote websites for businesses and social media posts for celebrities. I penned articles for newspapers. I was a copywriter for brands of vodka, wine, and even a line of jewelry.

Companion worked in advertising. As the economy everywhere was sputtering and struggling, he took on as many projects as he could find. He'd often enlist my help to write advertisements and scripts for commercials. Sometimes we'd get up at 4:00 in the morning to work together on his freelance gigs before he left for his day job.

I remember nights when he'd bring home a bottle of wine and ask me to help him write 100 tag lines about discount carpets. Not the glamorous writing career I'd dreamt of, but my momentum was forward.

I learned and stretched and grew. Filling my Confidence Tank was an ongoing battle but the routines I put in place served me well.

On a walk one day, I heard The Muse whisper, "This is your happily-ever-after, Crista."

Wait. What?

This? The struggle? The slog that makes me feel wrung out at the end of each day? The gigs that come sporadically with little money? The long hours alone working for nothing? This paying of dues, honing of vision, learning of craft?

This is my happily-ever-after? Seriously?

And The Muse sighed, "Happily-ever-after isn't a glamorous destination, Crista. It's undertaking the journey, engaging with the work. It's doing those things that build your confidence."

My big break came when a big London newspaper commissioned me for a big article about my big jump from established American art dealer to starting a new creative path in Europe. This was big!

For the first time ever, I received a paycheck with lots of zeroes for creative writing. And when a photographer spent an afternoon taking my picture for the article – I felt like “Queen for a Day.”

“This is it!” I told myself as I did The Happy Dance around the room.

The day the article came out, I jumped out of bed to check my email in anticipation. I had nearly 200 messages from all over the world! I clicked the first one.

It was from Not Enough.

A troll who’d signed herself Holly W. Smith. Her caustic words about my looks, my age, and my abilities, took aim straight at my Confidence Tank and blew it up. “Who did you sleep with to get featured in this newspaper?” She’d demanded to know. “You’re a joke!”

My confidence spilled all over the floor. I went back to bed with a pint of ice cream and a raging case of shame.

Never mind that there were hundreds of beautiful messages waiting to tell me that my story had touched them, or to congratulate me and wish me well. Out of all those emails, which was the only one that I saved? The only one that I can still recite today?

The message that told me I was Not Enough.

I'm not saying that feedback always comes in black or white. I still get plenty of responses to my work that are critical, but the comments are relevant, and they're shared respectfully. This message was neither. It was personal and vicious.

I became obsessed with Holly W. Smith. Who was she? Why would she write such things? I discovered that the email address it came from wasn't even a real account. Holly W. Smith was a pseudonym for a coward who was afraid to use their real name.

And why should that bitch's opinion matter?

I'm doing the work! I'm showing up! Sure, I'm not perfect but what is perfect anyway? At least I stand up for what I believe in and sign my real name to it, Holly W. Smith. I don't hide personal attacks behind a pseudonym.

I put down the ice cream and licked the spoon. From then on, I would be responsible for my own Confidence Tank, vigilant against whose opinions I let it.

But I was still scared. What if I wasn't strong enough for success?

I remembered an Academy Awards ceremony years before when Madonna was scheduled to sing. This was the height of her fame. Everyone was waiting, breathless, for her performance. The camera zoomed in close. Her hands were shaking in fear.

Madonna was scared.

Of course, it was completely understandable. This wasn't a pop concert. This audience was not comprised of her usual adoring fans. She had a lot to prove. But the memory of seeing Madonna face down the Not Enough monster somehow gave me permission to do the same.

The point is that successful people are not special, not super-human. They just work hard at what they do. They take risks, even when they're terrified.

Courage never stands alone. Scratch the surface and you'll see fear hiding right next to it.

We're all scared. We jump despite fear, not waiting until it's gone. That's what courage is. And as artists, it's one of our strongest weapons against Not Enough.

Have the courage to ignore your critics when they're wrong because you get to choose whose opinions you allow in. Think of it as installing a filter for your Confidence Tank – only let in the feedback that's constructive and helps you grow. Handle this decision with care. Guard your Confidence Tank.

I'm so grateful to Holly W. Smith for teaching me that.

FEATHER SIX. QUEST 2:

164

Identify an artist you admire who exudes confidence.

Start paying attention to interviews and documentaries about artists. What specific behaviors or attitudes do they exhibit that you'd like to emulate?

Choose one and practice incorporating it into your own life for a week.

The Great Photographer

My mentor Bill Jay had started his career as a photographer. This had been a lifelong dream ever since boyhood, when he'd first mixed his own chemicals in the darkroom that he'd built under his parents' stairway in England.

As a young man at the start of his career, he'd had an opportunity to show his portfolio to an established and highly celebrated photographer whom he deeply admired. This Great Photographer took one look at Bill's work and pronounced, "Boring."

Bill later told me this was a gift: the Great Photographer had been right, and Bill's talents were better served as a photographic historian and a champion of the medium. Though he published books of his portraits of other photographers, Bill considered himself more of a teacher and historian than an artist.

Bill may not have believed in himself as a photographer, but he couldn't stop taking pictures. Bill was a maker.

Toward the end of his life, Bill told me that he'd found that initial portfolio that he'd shared with The Great Photographer all those years before. He said that as he thumbed through the images, his heart fell.

The work was good.

The Great Photographer had been wrong. Bill had let someone else's opinion stop him from fulfilling his calling.

Bill was not a man given to regrets, but I could see how this unsettled him. At the same time, it set him free, and he began shooting pictures with abandon.

It's important to understand that as an artist, not everyone will like your stuff. Sometimes it's because they're jealous, sometimes it's because they have a different aesthetic or interest. Sometimes they're just plain wrong.

It doesn't matter why – the challenge is to not take it personally. Not let it stop you.

Because you've got work to do.

It wasn't easy to begin thinking of myself a writer.

I constantly watched for The Writing Police to bust me, fearing that I'd be found out. And I worried that having faith in myself would be seen as hubris.

But I've learned that confidence isn't about hubris—it's about owning who you are, without apology.

When I was in college, I took on an unusual assignment: reviewing churches for an underground newspaper. It was my "Church Search" column. There, I'd write tongue-in-cheek church criticism – grading religious services by angels instead of stars, commenting on the fellowship snacks, and critiquing the singing voice of the congregation. I was using humor to explore what other people believed in.

Looking back, I realize this wasn't just my first creative act — it was my first feather earned as I moved towards embracing my identity as a writer and artist.

Years later, when I found myself spending a lot of time alone in England, I followed my curiosity again. Now, I started visiting British churches.

I would take photographs, interviewing vicars, vergers, and attendees. I wrote about them for fun – because artists are weird that way – and because confidence grows when we embrace our weirdness.

My own confidence grew as I pursued this passion. I even became a tiny bit famous within the British church community. This led to an invitation to sit in the audience of a TV panel program called "The Big Questions".

On the panel that day was an editor from *The Guardian* newspaper – my favorite newspaper as it turned out.

After the taping of the show, I made a bold move. I snuck backstage to follow the editor. So intent on stalking him, I hadn't realized that he was going into the gentleman's toilet. I followed him in before realizing my mistake.

I'm not sure which one of us was more surprised.

Now it was too late to turn back. So, I acted as if I had meant to go into the gentleman's toilet – as if I go into the gentlemen's toilet every day – and I gave him my pitch.

I said, "My name is Crista and I write church reviews. They're thoughtful, humanistic and often funny. I think *The Guardian's* readers would appreciate them. May I send you some examples?"

Yes, my heart was pounding. Yes, I was certain that I was making a complete fool of myself. But I jumped anyway.

And the universe caught me – because within a week I had a byline on *The Guardian's Belief Blog!*

I was in heaven.

I learned that confidence isn't about never being afraid—it's about being afraid and doing it anyway. It's about preparing for opportunities and seizing them when they come, even when you risk looking stupid.

Remember, being an artist isn't about waiting for someone else to validate you. It's about owning your identity, bringing yourself completely to your work, and letting it represent who you are.

That's what we love about art. That's what we want to bring, always, to our work. And to our life.

May I hear an AMEN?

Creative people often have certain things in common.

We crave feedback. We want our work to be seen and we want to know what our work says to the viewer. At the same time, creative people are allergic to criticism because it triggers feelings of failure and shame.

To be fair, most everybody prefers to avoid criticism. Constructive or not, criticism isn't nearly as much fun as being told our work is brilliant. But artists need feedback, and feedback can't always be positive. Otherwise, you never grow, your work won't progress.

Don't you hate that?

It's unfair to blame the messenger. Remember, people bring their own experiences, aesthetics, and ideas to looking at art. It's highly personal. But that doesn't mean it's not real or it doesn't matter.

Criticism always matters – to the critic.

But you choose whether it should matter to you. In other words, consider the source. Be protective of whose words you allow in. And only pay attention to those words that help you to grow.

So how should you handle that feedback when it triggers defensiveness? I've found that the best response to any opinion is, "That's interesting."

That's interesting is open, not defensive. It's a polite response.

That's interesting doesn't accept, yet it doesn't discount. It allows space for consideration.

That's interesting offers an opportunity to learn, and learning is in the artist's job description.

So don't fear feedback. Your job is to look for blessings, and you never know where they might come from.

And that, my dear artist, truly is interesting.

REFLECTION

172

Think of a piece of criticism, constructive or otherwise, that you've received about your work. Practice responding with "That's interesting" as you remember the exchange.

Then, reflect on how this response feels compared to your usual reaction. What insights does this exercise give you?

I told my friend Andrew David Smith about a special place I liked to visit since childhood, it's a tiny island in a hidden pond at a local park. I'd been riding my bike to this secret island for years. It's where I do my dreaming.

He replied, "Andy's Island!"

When Andy was in high school, the pond was just being built and water was piped in slowly. Because of the construction, boulders lay everywhere. Each day, Andy told me, he would move a few stones and place them across the pipe where the water trickled in. It took years for soil to collect.

First it was just a tiny spot of land – until one day a tree appeared. Eventually lush land grew around it.

Andy's Island.

I loved Andy's story of commitment to creation. I loved how a blind boy was able to overcome the obstacles to move boulders and built an enchanting paradise. And I loved how our own stories magically intersected even before we met.

Andy was an artist – you may recall that he was the first artist I ever met. Andy was also sight-impaired but nevertheless, his artwork is full of vibrant color and magical imagination. I love it because I love him, but also because it reveals a special light that eyes can't see.

“Why don’t you show your work?” I’d suggested one day.

His face went dark. He tried to change the subject. I pressed the point. Eventually, his story poured out and the tears soon followed.

A friend of his had also admired Andy’s work and he’d arranged an appointment with an art gallery in town. Andy proudly brought his portfolio.

The gallerist, Andy confessed through his tears, looked at the work, sniffed, “High school stuff” dismissively. And then he laughed.

“He laughed at me!” Andy cried.

Andy’s shame was so heavy in recalling the encounter that nothing I said could take that pain away.

The gallerist had laughed in his face.

Andy left that art gallery feeling humiliated. Any artist would. His Confidence Tank now had a gaping hole that never would heal. Andy continued to draw but something inside of him broke that day. I think it was his heart.

But it was the gallerist who was blind. He couldn't see that Andy's work was beautiful, a lovely expression from the heart of a man who sees the whole world as his friend.

From that day forward, Andy told me, he created his work solely to give away. He liked to draw in coffee shops and when he heard it was someone's birthday or anniversary, he would proudly gift them a drawing. If someone complimented the work, he would give them the piece.

"It's better this way," he said to me, with a shrug.

Truth be told, Andy could have used the money that his art might have made. He just didn't have the confidence to ask for it anymore. That gallerist had emptied his tank.

He might not have had riches or fame. He might not have had gallery shows or wealthy collectors. But to my mind, Andrew David Smith was a great artist and a huge success.

Although he lost his sight when he was 8 years old, Andy always had a vision. As an artist and spiritual seeker, he had followed that vision faithfully.

And just as the boulders he lay down each day in high school would eventually become Andy's flourishing island, the seeds of wisdom and love that Andy spread during his life had blossomed beautifully too. And the artwork that he gifted to strangers spread joy.

He'd felt that the art world was closed to him, yet he filled the world with art anyway.

FEATHER SIX. QUEST 3:

Let's create an affirmation to fill your Confidence Tank and see you through the rest of our journey together. Your affirmation should fill you with good energy and resonate with who you are and where you want to go.

Keep it very simple. Short and sweet does the trick. Keep it present tense, like it's true right now.

Make it affirmative – not “I hope” or “I will try to” but rather you want to state I am!

Here are a few examples to inspire you:

- I am a valuable and unique artist.
- My work matters.
- I am creating art with confidence.
- I am worthy of success.
- I am stepping onto a bigger stage.
- I am enough, just as I am.
- I am building a thriving career.
- I am a working artist.

Now it's your turn:

Feather Seven: Persistence

Persistence is tenacity. It's resolve, it's the digging-in-deeper, it's the stick-to-it-ness, it's bouncing back. It's the decision to never quit.

Think about it. What's the one quality that all successful people share? They didn't quit.

So don't quit.

Audacity is a big part of success too. It takes audacity to jump. It's audacious to take a leap of faith outside of your comfort zone. It's audacious to keep going when things don't seem to work.

Some artists live audaciously and feel comfortable with risk. Others make little flapping gestures as they peer nervously over the edge. It doesn't matter if you feel afraid or not. What matters is that you have the courage to do it anyway.

What matters is that you do the work.

Too often I see artists allow challenges to stop them. Bad things happen or they feel discomfort, so they quit. But these very negatives can be your best friend, even your greatest inspiration – if you'll work with them.

Take responsibility for the bad things that happen in life and the challenges that appear in your path. You don't always get to choose them, but you do choose how you respond.

Choose to be responsible. Response-able. That means being able to respond and not just react.

Taking responsibility doesn't mean that you take the blame for things that have happened. It means that you take the glory for how things turn out. You decide how the story gets told and how it ends. You take ownership of overcoming the issue and the lesson learned. You assign the meaning to it.

This is how you persist.

The path of an artist is always going to be full of disappointments and rejection. But in being response-able, you will grow. Because when you change your energy, you change your life – not the other way around.

I don't think there's anything sadder than an artist who suffers from a failure of imagination. An artist who sees a door close and then gives up, walks away. Or who fails to ever finish but just jumps from side to side without really falling forward.

An artist is a creator.

So, create your opportunities. Create solutions to the challenges. Leverage your skill sets with what the world needs. Don't focus on what you don't have, but on what you do have. Then make the decision and follow through by creating systems or routines as part of your practice.

This doesn't mean I want you to become rigid about outputs or schedules. I understand that art is a joyful act, and joyful acts can't always follow the rules. When The Muse whispers, sometimes you've simply got to follow her.

But when she doesn't, when life is too loud for you to hear The Muse, it's the discipline of your practice that will see you through. The grit you've built through determined persistence will get you further and faster.

FEATHER SEVEN. QUEST 1:

A practice can be an approach, a strategy, a method. Do you have a practice around your work? A writing practice if you're a writer. A rehearsal practice if you're a musician. An artmaking practice – no matter your medium.

My artmaking practice is:

What about the business of that art? Making submissions. Answering calls. Building Websites. Connecting on social media. Is this part of your practice too?

My business practice is:

And what about learning? Do you have a practice for learning about art and business?

My learning practice is:

If you're reading this book, you're taking the right steps. Keep going Artist! I'm proud of you!

While I was living in England, Companion worked late every night. If he wasn't traveling for business on weekends, he was spending time with his children at their mother's house. This had been the price of admission, and I'd agreed to pay it.

I once again found myself on my own in a foreign country. Solitude gave me time to work on my crafts of writing and photography, and to look for paying gigs.

I studied to learn what I didn't know. And in between, I walked.

Keeping to the routine that I'd started in France; I took a long walk every day. No phone or music – just myself, a notebook, and a camera. I called it my Artist Walk.

In France I could walk for miles in the countryside without seeing another soul. In our small English town, I was surrounded by people. Being American, I'm completely comfortable starting conversations with strangers. So that's what I did.

I looked for other people who were lonely like me.

An elderly woman who sat on the same bench every day with her dog became my first friend. She tearfully confessed how empty life felt since losing her husband. I wrote a sweet story about her, made a portrait of her dog Ozzie, and shared it on Facebook so that across an ocean, my old friends could meet my new friend too.

In the park, I passed a lovely woman with a sad face. I asked her to tell me about the pretty scarf she wore but she shared her story instead. She'd moved to this town to be near her son's family, but they hadn't called in months. She wanted to go home, but she didn't know where that was anymore. She was just so lonely, she said.

My heart opened, and so did my imagination. I shared her story on Facebook along with a photograph I'd taken of a lost scarf left on the ground.

And this was how I found my voice. I found my voice by writing stories about lonely people for Facebook. Because I was lonely too.

It was because of loneliness that I'd joined social media in the first place. I missed friends and family back home. Because these experiences I was having in the small British town felt so meaningful, I shared them. And this was how I started to build an audience for my stories.

Loneliness, as it turned out, was my best friend.

We all know artists who do incredible work but fail to achieve their professional goals. It's tragic and unfair. At the same time, I'll bet you can name several artists who enjoy great commercial success – but their work leaves you scratching your head and wondering why them?

It would be better for all of us, artists, and culture alike, if only the best creative work was rewarded. But the world doesn't always operate like that – especially the creative world.

The truth is that artists who focus their energies on marketing and promotion are more likely to achieve their professional goals. It isn't always the quality of the art that opens doors – but knowing which doors to knock on.

Yet without a connection with creativity, with ideas, with technical excellence, the quality of the work will simply not be there. And it's this quality of the work that really drives artists.

As much as we may crave success, I can't think of one artist who doesn't really strive for greatness. No one wants to be considered a hack for their creative work, no matter how much money they make.

There's a fine balance artists must achieve between doing the nuts and bolts of the work and connecting with the spark of The Muse. It's a dance between execution and vision. And even though we wish it felt graceful, it often feels clumsy.

We all want more time to devote to the work. We fear we don't put in enough time to promote the work. The result is exhaustion and guilt. It's not just you: every creative person shares this.

But I've learned to accept that it's a dance. Sometimes the creativity gets to lead. Other times the business stuff keeps the beat. What's important to succeeding as an artist is that you don't sacrifice one for the other. There must be a balance between business and creativity.

You know when you're off-beat.

Are you focusing too much on making the work? Is the inventory starting to stockpile? Have you allowed your marketing efforts to languish? Or have you been so involved in pushing the work that you've lost touch with the creative spark? Has your connection with The Muse suffered?

No matter where you find yourself right now in the dance, I invite you to take the lead.

If you're waiting for permission to promote your work, this is it. I'm giving you that permission. Your work deserves it.

If you need encouragement to engage with your creativity on a deeper level, I'm steering you toward those foods that feed The Muse: introspection, inspiration, and knowledge. They're vital.

Can you hear the music playing? Take the lead, it's time to dance.

We called her 'Grandma Ach' because of her habit of beginning each sentence with a guttural sound of disapproval. "Ach! Vat you do?"

Her name was Mary Anne. She was the daughter of poor German immigrants. Farmers.

But Mary Anne was an artist.

Bright, beautiful, and serious, the photos of my great-grandmother remind me of a young Georgia O'Keeffe. And like Georgia O'Keeffe, Mary Anne was devoted to art.

After her chores, every minute was spent drawing. This is what she wanted to do with her life. This is who she was.

But times were very different for women then. They didn't have a choice.

One day a farmer named Adam arrived at the family farm. He was looking for a wife. His own wife, his beloved Elizabeth, had passed away. Adam needed a woman to raise his three kids and help run the farm.

The daughters were called out and 14-year-old Mary Anne was chosen.

She fought back. She'd never even met this man before. She didn't want to get married. She didn't want to raise children. She was going to be an artist; it was her soul.

Mary Anne would spend the rest of her life in Elizabeth's house, next door to Elizabeth's parents. She raised Elizabeth's children and each night she lay with a man who continued to mourn Elizabeth. Mary Anne never knew love and she never expressed the art in her soul.

Over the years, she would give Adam 10 more children – including my grandfather.

Grandma Ach was an old and angry woman when she finally got all the children out of the house. When the last one left, Mary Anne marched to the store to buy herself canvas and paint. Finally. She was free.

But then life played its cruelest joke of all. Mary Anne went blind.

Grandma Ach would live a long life, but not a happy one. She was never given the choice to do the work she felt called to do. She never knew freedom.

I look at the choices that artists have the privilege to make today; we choose how to spend our time, how to make our money, what's worth fighting for and who we want to be. We forget how lucky we are.

So, when an artist whines to me that she wants to make art but just can't get into the studio, making one excuse or another, or another complains that he's quitting the art business because social media is just too hard, I tell them, "That's your choice."

To be fair, I sometimes make excuses for myself too. We all do. But then I remember the hard and bitter face of my Grandma Ach, and I dig in deeper.

History is full of artists like Mary Anne who didn't have the opportunity to do the work their soul yearned for. For them, we need to push pass our discomforts and resistance.

You have the luxury of making the choice. Choose art.

Procrastination: Let's Talk about It Now, Not Later.

Procrastination is a word I hear artists use a lot.

It's easy to beat yourself up, to wonder if you're too lazy to be a working artist. It's easy to identify yourself as a procrastinator and accept that as lifelong sentence instead of a choice.

If you can scratch the surface of procrastination and question it, you'll find that it holds important information.

When you find yourself procrastinating, start by asking yourself if you're afraid? Fear of stepping outside of our comfort zone is often the culprit behind procrastination. Scratch a little deeper and you'll discover Not Enough.

Challenge it.

How? If there's something that you're procrastinating about and you suspect fear might be the reason, list 3 reasons why you will succeed.

For example, if you're a visual artist who's been procrastinating about answering a call for entries and you look for the fear, you might find that you're afraid of rejection.

When you can identify 3 reasons why you will succeed, you might include the fact that you've developed a strong body of work, you've researched this opportunity and it makes a good fit,

and that just by submitting your proposal, you're getting your work in front of art-world decision-makers. And that's always a good thing.

Not convinced? Still procrastinating?

When I procrastinate, sometimes it's because it's something I don't really want to do. Ask yourself: is this something I really want to do?

Or is it something you should do? If you should, is it that important? Is it truly necessary?

Question your resistances.

Perfectionism is another trap for artists.

"Better is the enemy of well done." Yes, it's important to do everything to the highest standard, but as long as you keep trying to make it better, as long as it's Not Enough, it will never live in the world.

Steve Jobs famously stated that "real art ships." You do your work well but if you never finish, if you never ship, it's not art. It's an obsession.

Like a child who's ready to leave home, let your work stand on its own feet. It may wobble. It may prove to be too soon. But your job isn't to coddle it forever. It's not about making anything perfect. Your job is to finish your work well and jump again.

It's a practice – remember?

FEATHER SEVEN. QUEST 2:

Do you find yourself procrastinating on starting a project or a task? If so, let's workshop it.

Write the project or task you're procrastinating on.

Ask yourself if it scares you in some way? Does it seem too big, for example?

If you answered yes above, write 3 reasons why you know that you will succeed, in spite of your fears.

Ask yourself if this task or project is something that you really want to do?

If you answered no, write 3 things that could happen as a result of doing it and 3 things that will happen if you continue procrastinating forever.

If I do it anyway:

If I procrastinate forever:

Now make a list of everything you need to do to get started. Break it down into little-teeny-tiny steps.

Pick out the first step. Take it.

I was just 19 years old the first time I saw Walter Richardson play music. From the moment we met, we were old friends. I've always called Walt my guardian angel because of his wisdom and insight.

In fact, it was Walt who first suggested that I teach artists what I know about the art business. There would be no "Working Artist" if it weren't for him.

I asked Walt what advice he could share with you?

"Just work your ass off. Just play, if you're playing guitar, just play, play, play. Doesn't even have to be an audience. Just play in your living room. Always have your tools with you.

"I carry two to three guitar picks in my pocket because my motto is you never know when you're going to run into a guitar. And when you do, you can just pull the pick out and start playing."

In those early days together, Companion and I didn't have much money, so we were forced to entertain ourselves. Luckily, we found one another entertaining.

Companion once joked that he dreamed of starting a Dalicatessan, a Salvador Dali themed deli where all the sandwiches would be surreal. You'd never know what you would get.

I chimed in that the appetizer menu could be called 'Hello Dali!' Then I sang the song the song 'Hello Dolly' but changed the words to be about Salvador Dali.

It became a game with us. We'd take a popular song and change the lyrics to be about the Surrealists. It sounds ridiculous – but this is how our minds work when we're together.

One day Companion asked if there had ever been a musical made about Salvador Dali? And why don't we write one?

I had a long list of reasons why we shouldn't write a musical. At the top of that list was the fact that we didn't know anything about musicals.

"How hard could it be?" He shrugged.

We were so naïve.

To begin, we googled, "How to write a musical."

Because I'd studied art history, I did the research. Once we knew Dali's story, we each wrote a few songs – after googling "How to write a song," of course.

Because Companion worked in advertising, he put the project together in a visual presentation. We'd found pictures online and written enough song lyrics to outline Dali's life. Then we started working on the script to fill in the story.

The learning curve was overwhelming.

Certain people told us, "Don't worry figuring out the proper script format and all that stuff. All producers care about is content. They can hire someone else to format it."

But if I have one rule as an artist, it's to always present my ideas properly. I've sat on enough art boards and panels to say with confidence that doing it right matters. You've got to know the rules before you break them.

You never want someone's first impression of your work to be that you don't know what you're doing. Even when you don't know what you're doing.

And we didn't know what we were doing.

The theatre has a long history of following a traditional format, and learning it was painful for both Companion and myself. Our missteps were obvious. We made fools of ourselves more than once in front of important theatre people because we were learning as we went along.

A friend introduced us to a Grammy award-winning songwriter who'd written huge hits in pop, folk, rock, and country genres. We invited him to a boozy lunch at a fancy restaurant and pressed him to read our lyrics. After the second bottle of wine, he finally agreed.

"But" he warned us, "I'm not interested in writing music for your musical."

After seeing our presentation, he changed his tune. "I'll do it because there's something really compelling about your lyrics," he said.

Companion and I looked at each other in guilty conspiracy. When was he going to discover the truth? We didn't know what we were doing!

You are a maker.

You make art. You make meaning. You make beauty. Like an alchemist, you transform base materials into gold.

As an Artist-Warrior, you already have this power. Just as a character in a beloved tale discovers their hidden strengths, you too must believe in your potential.

For you are on the Hero's Journey.

As everyone knows, heroes slay those dragons that threaten to harm us. To an Artist-Warrior those dragons are named Not Enough.

Learn to own the power of creativity to carry you through this journey. Nurture your spirit. Engage with an inner life beyond gadgets and obligations and all those things that try to define you as something different than who you truly are – an Artist-Warrior.

Have meaningful conversations with your Self.

Believe in magic and alchemy and beauty.

Strive to be tenacious. Choose audacity whenever possible. Don't forget to trust your intuition.¹⁹⁶
With your unwavering courage, steadfast integrity, and dedicated work, you will ignite a beacon of inspiration, guiding others toward their own creative journeys.

Because you are an Artist Warrior.

When Not Enough Gets the Last Laugh

It's funny how much Companion and I used to make one another laugh. We even kept a "Book of Funny," collecting all our jokes. We delighted friends and family with our impromptu skits. We'd alarm passersby as we howled at one another's antics just walking home.

It's funny that the first song we wrote together for the musical was about how ambition and competition destroyed Dalí's marriage. We thought we were being clever. We didn't see the irony then.

Over the next few years, Companion and I rewrote *Dalí: The Musical* a thousand times. Each revision pulled us further apart, each word became a battleground. What had started as shared laughter curdled into bitter silence.

It's audacious to take on a big project. It's audacious to venture into unknown territory, to stand before decision-makers with nothing but your dreams and determination. It's audacious to believe that two people can create something larger than themselves.

But at the heart of all that audacity is persistence. You've got to put the work in, devote yourself to learning. And stay focused for the long haul.

I've always believed in tenacity and collaboration, but when the conversations become about being right – something is wrong. That's a sign that it's time to let go. Because we couldn't agree, Companion and I let our project go. And the relationship went with it.

I had become Not Enough for him, as he had become Not Enough for me.

Isn't it funny how the monster got the last laugh?

FEATHER SEVEN. QUEST 3:

Persistence is an important skill to develop. I work with a lot of artists, and I often recommend that they create a routine that fits into their mornings or evenings. I call it “The Working Artist's Power Routine.”

Developing a consistent daily sequence of tasks can be a game-changer for your creative goals. Let's create a powerful morning or evening routine that sets you up for success:

1. Choose your time: Will this be a morning or evening routine?

2. List some key goals you're currently working towards.

3. Now, design a Working Artist's Power Routine that incorporates elements to support these goals. Include at least one creative activity, one planning/reflection activity, and one self-care activity. For example:
 - 5 minutes: Meditation or deep breathing
 - 10 minutes: Free writing or sketching
 - 5 minutes: Reviewing and updating your professional to-do list
 - 5 minutes: Visualizing success in your current project
 - 5 minutes: Stretching or gentle movement

Outline your own Power Routine.

4. Commit to following this Power Routine for the next 7 days. At the end of the week, reflect:

- How did this routine impact my artistic practice?
- Which elements were most beneficial?
- What adjustments, if any, will make this routine more effective for me?
- Am I willing to continue making this routine part of my day?

Remember, the key to success is consistency. By creating a Power Routine, you're setting yourself up for persistent, daily progress. Stick with it, and watch your determination grow!

Feather Eight: Failure

Wait a minute, Crista; you're telling me that failure is a feather? Of course, it is! Every artist fails. And you won't believe how often failure turns out to be the most important feather in your wings.

Because it's not about giving up, it's about getting up.

The only thing you can truly fail at is failing to try. Because by not even trying, you've failed yourself. But by trying, at least you've shown up, done the work and learned the lessons. That's not failure, that's the work.

Release your need to control outcomes, to arbitrarily apply labels of "good and "bad," "failure" and "success." Set your course toward the direction you want to arrive at and take the steps to get there. Be open to life's detours.

This creative journey may not take you to where you think it will. The Universe always has the last word on how things turn out, and It likes surprises.

Watch the magic that happens when you show up, do the work, and allow.

The Big Time

Back where I come from, a music man named Walter Richardson is a legend. He plays the guitar and sings homegrown music too. Walter's always writing songs.

The first time I saw Walt play was the first time that I ever walked into a bar. It was in Tempe, Arizona, and I was 19 years old. I like to tell people that when I met Walt, his dreadlocks were still short and new. Today they sweep past the floor.

I recognized something special from the moment his hands began to strum the guitar. His songs felt written just for me. And soon they would be. Our relationship blossomed and he's been a lifelong friend. "My guardian angel," I call him.

Back in the day, he'd show me the songs he was working on. He let me watch his process as a songwriter. He'd sometimes be inspired by our conversations, and he'd write about us.

It was Walter who first persuaded me to put pen to paper. He'd listen to my stories and ask, "Why don't you write them down, Crista?" He encouraged my photography too, "Girl, you've got a good eye!"

Like every artist, Walter dreamt of The Big Time. I saw it for him too.

Back in Arizona, his crowds were getting larger, and his fans were wildly devoted. He headlined a large band of talented musicians and each time they played together, they set the place afire.

Until that day that The Big Time came to Walt – just as we knew it would.

He was wined and dined by music label executives, with promises and lavish praise. “There’s just one thing,” the executives said. They only wanted Walt on the label. Not his band.

Walt chose to walk away. He wasn't the sort of man who could look his band in the eye if he'd betrayed them for The Big Time.

But the band itself didn't see eye to eye. Soon they disbanded. Walter once again found himself alone with the guitar. The gigs dried up. The crowds dispersed.

I watched Walter struggle, as any artist would. He took on a day job for a while.

But he never stopped playing music.

Instead, he went deeper. He looked at why he made music. He looked at what he wanted to share. He looked at what he had to give.

He began singing his songs in local schools and working with at-risk kids. He founded a music festival to raise money for worthy nonprofit causes. He played on the streets, and he played in backyards.

His phone started ringing again.

Walter's music is part of the community fabric now, celebrated by generations. Every time I go out with him, I smile to see how loved Walt is.

"If I'd signed with The Big Time music label," Walt told me, "I'd be mobbed when I go out. Instead, I'm appreciated."

A few years ago, the Arizona Music and Entertainment Hall of Fame was formed. Walter Richardson was one of the first inductees. I danced and sang along with thousands of raving fans as he played the sold-out show in celebration.

When COVID-19 hit, and Walter was unable to play for others, others came through for him. Rock stars and local supporters quietly sent checks to see Walter through. He told me that each time he opened his mailbox, it felt like Christmas.

And when the crisis was over and Walt returned to the stage, he was honored by the community with even more awards for his talent and musical service.

Artists often yearn for The Big Time in The Big City. But Walter taught me that you can be a Big Timer wherever you are.

Just keep playing.

REFLECTION:

Consider the story of Walter Richardson and reflect on these questions:

Would you have been able to turn away your opportunity for The Big Time by sacrificing the people who helped get you there?

When you look at how Walt's story has turned out, do you think he made the right decision?
Why?

Is there anything in Walt's story that you can take away for yourself?

Now what?

Where's the fabulous gallery opening in New York City? What about the international collectors to lavish praise and money on you? Where's the agent and personal assistant to take care of those pesky tasks that are beneath you?

Instead, you battle rejection. You wonder where the money's going to come from. You spend all your time posting and hoping. You find closed doors and indifference.

This isn't what you signed up for.

Some of us are still so shaken from taking the jump that we don't even realize that we've already landed.

Stop. Take a breath. Look around. You're an artist! You've landed! This is a good thing. How many people never choose to take that jump? How many more never even have the opportunity?

Don't gaze at your world with eyes of lack. Be in constant search of blessings. The more you look, the more you'll find.

Follow this...

He thought his career was over.

Bill Jay had been a celebrated professor of Photographic Studies. He'd published more than 20 books and 400 essays. He'd edited two globally influential photography magazines. He had lectured and taught around the world. And he'd mentored hundreds of artists, including myself.

Bill's passion was in supporting other photographers. He photographed photographers everywhere he went and had solo exhibitions and books of the portraits he made.

And then he was bitten by a rattlesnake.

One medical mishandling led to another, and Bill was unexpectedly forced to retire, to give up the work he'd done so passionately. Because of the rattlesnake venom, his heart became so fragile that he tired easily and had to sleep every few hours.

Bill exclaimed, "Talk about a setback! I still had so many dreams to chase, so many things I wanted to do."

Though disappointed, Bill accepted this sudden turn of life's plans with curiosity and his usual enthusiasm. He chose to be resilient. He moved to a hippie beach town outside San Diego and created a new life, a smaller life.

No longer able to travel, to lug heavy camera equipment, to meet with students, Bill wondered what was next?

He started carrying a small digital camera in his pocket but rarely took it out. "Maybe I'm done with photography?" he wondered. "Maybe my time is over?"

His daughter noted the bearded and lined faces of the homeless men who roamed the San Diego beaches. She joked that this town was perfect for Bill. Pointing to his beard she said, "All those old gits look just like you!"

Bill knew it was only fate that separated himself from these homeless men. Who were they? Curious, he began to talk with them, to learn their stories. He started taking their pictures, shooting stark close-ups in hard blacks and whites.

He carried the prints with him. He'd offer them as a gift each time his path would cross one of the men, though he imagined the photographs probably ended up in the trash.

One day, a rough-looking fellow came looking for Bill.

Bill told me he'd felt very apprehensive as he was led down an alleyway and into an abandoned shack where the homeless men were known to gather. What was going to happen there? Was it stupid to follow this guy?

The man said nothing but gestured for Bill to go inside. When he entered the shack, Bill found that the men had staged an exhibition. Their portraits were all taped to the wall.

They'd titled their show *The Wall of Shame*. But, in fact, they were proud.

Not prouder than Bill. He said it was the biggest accolade of his career. This small exhibition meant more to him than a one-person show at the Museum of Modern Art. It was the perfect ending to his career.

Bill's prognosis wasn't good. The rattlesnake's venom had entered his heart and caused severe damage. "One year," the doctors guessed, "if you're lucky."

One year to live. That wasn't a lot of time.

A photographer friend saw Bill's images and sent them to a homeless advocacy group in New York. Soon, Bill's pictures of the homeless men he'd met on the beach were being used to raise money for the cause.

A book was published, titled *Men Like Me*, and suddenly Bill's career wasn't over. It was just different.

The success of *Men Like Me* led to two other book projects – both focused on Bill's photography and not his work about other photographers.

I've never known an artist to retire. That urge to question, to draw connections, to create, runs deep. And when devotion extends to sharing and giving, the world can't help but notice.

The last time I spoke with Bill, he'd just sold all his belongings and moved to Costa Rica. This was thirteen years after his initial diagnosis.

He told me that when I moved to France, he'd been inspired to live in Costa Rica – I'd inspired Bill Jay, the man who'd been my greatest inspiration. Fancy that.

No one knows exactly what transpired, but Bill Jay passed away in Costa Rica. To my mind, Bill died in his sleep on a hammock next to the beach. It would be a fitting last line to Bill Jay's story.

I only wish there were more Men Like Him.

FEATHER EIGHT. QUEST 1:

211

If you were given one year to live, what choices would you make about your work as an artist?

As she wiped away the tears, the artist told me her story.

She'd applied for a public art project that was a perfect match for her work. She had all the right qualifications. She was certain that she'd get it. She even started to make plans for moving forward.

But then she wasn't chosen.

It left her stunned, questioning herself and her talent. It took all of two seconds for "no" to turn into shame, to wrong, to Not Enough. We've all been there, haven't we?

But here's another story.

One day, I knocked on a neighbor's door just as he was opening a bottle of champagne.

"Come in and join me!" he cried out, obviously excited. "I'm celebrating! I've just received another rejection letter for my novel!"

This guy understood that if you want someone to say "Yes," you cannot be afraid of "No." You've got to get past your ego and fears of failure if you want to get to where you want to go.

It hurts when doors close. Not Enough likes to label it as a "failure." But we don't have control over how The Universe plays its cards, only how we respond.

And what's the most powerful response you can have? Gratitude. Curiosity. Faith.

ARTIST INTERVIEW:

In one of the many books written by artist Vik Muniz, he admitted that when he succeeds, it's because that time he failed to fail. I love that.

I asked Vik to expand on this idea of success in art being a failure to fail:

“Failure is part of the equation of any empirical process. There are things that can go right or wrong – that accounts for 50% of the experiment. If you discard that and take it away from the process, it's almost impossible for you to develop.

“Failure is accumulated knowledge.”

It's Easy to Think that We're Failing

But what about acknowledging what you're doing, life's little successes? Not from a defensive position. But from a curious one.

What have I accomplished today? What were my victories? What's been the best moment so far? What steps did I take forward?

And on those days that you come up empty as far as working on art, when real life takes over, know that it's okay. The people whom we love are always the priority, so is our health. These have got to be non-negotiable.

But if you find yourself coming up empty day after day, with no victories, it's time to take action. Little-teeny-tiny steps are the best way to begin.

When you start paying attention to the small victories, they quickly add up. More importantly, you're filling your Confidence Tank.

Everything comes at the perfect time, as long as it finds you working.

As I continued the struggle to survive my new life in England, I fell down a lot. Countless rejections hounded my every step.

But it was when I fell back that I got hurt.

I had sworn I would only fall forward; no longer work in the gallery world, only accept jobs that used my own creativity. But when a London art gallery called, I answered.

I had met the owner of this gallery several times in my previous career as an art dealer in the states. None of those encounters was very pleasant because my impression was that the owner of the London gallery was an entitled patronizing snob.

But now that he'd just offered me a big contract, I ignored my gut.

Truth be told, this opportunity seemed too good to pass up. In the largest trendiest art gallery in London, this new job seemed fabulous in every way. I felt like a million bucks.

But in fact, I was being paid in promises.

I discovered that a dear friend of mine, an artist whom I worked with in my old life in America, was in a legal dispute with the very gallerist I was working for. My world was torn in two – between my past and my future.

The gallery owner and artist squared off in court, and everyone who worked at the gallery was caught in the middle. The gallerist had been selling artwork that wasn't his to sell. The courts judged against him. And as the gallery went down in flames – taking us all with it.

I had fallen back, taking a job that I knew was wrong because I feared Not Enough. And now I was landing on my ass.

At the same time, I'd already had to spend the money I thought was coming in. Without my contract being honored, I was now in debt with no way out.

I felt trapped, terrified there was no resolution. All I had sacrificed, all the work I'd done to build a new life, was for nothing. I didn't dare ask Companion to save me, he had his own problems, and we were still squabbling about *Dali: The Musical*.

My nights were sleepless, my days full of anguished tears as Not Enough beat me to the ground. Rock Bottom. I found myself totally broke, burning with shame and in utter despair.

BANKRUPT.

Feather Nine: Sharing It with Your People

It's one thing to make work of quality and meaning, but sharing it is an important feather – in fact, it's vital. Art is communication, after all.

The way you share your work with your audience, both online and offline, and with your local community, is not just the path to your goal — it's the goal itself.

This is where the sharp blade of your truth is revealed to yourself and to others.

Art is your teacher, showing you who you truly are. Sharing your art is where you express what you've learned – and what you're still learning. This is a journey without end, remember?

Rock Bottom

So there I was, BANKRUPT. I'd landed on my ass and now I was bouncing up and down at the center of Rock Bottom.

I could only see the failure but in fact, my feathers would soon spread into wings.

I was full of fear and shame. I was certain that all the sacrifices I'd made had been for nothing. I missed Bill Jay so much and wished I could turn to him again for advice. When I closed my eyes, I'd remember him saying, "Start with what you already have."

But what did I have? No money. No job. The only thing that I could see was Not Enough.

The bankruptcy court had allowed me to keep \$179. That's all I had left to my name. "But you have something even more valuable," Companion reminded me. "You have creativity."

"It's not enough!" I wailed. When I looked in the mirror I saw the word BANKRUPTCY, as if it was written across my forehead.

I called my guardian angel, the singer Walt Richardson, and cried into the phone, "Everyone says I have no choice but to go back to the states and work in a gallery again. The dream is over – I can't become a writer and an artist."

"Why not?" Walt asked.

"Because I'm BANKRUPT!"

"You're not bankrupt," Walt told me. "You're Crista. You're an adventurer, a seeker of beauty. You're an artist whose words and pictures inspire people. Girl, you're gonna survive this situation so that you can show others how to survive. That's what you're going to do."

I felt a spark of hope. Maybe I wasn't BANKRUPT. Maybe my circumstances didn't define me. Maybe this was just something I was experiencing.

"Why don't you teach?" Walt continued. "Start with what you already have. Why don't you use your creativity, use your stories and your pictures to teach other artists? You have a whole wealth of information about the art world that you can share."

Follow this...

I opened the archived folders on my computer. I was looking for any files from my former art-world career that I might be able to share with artists, something that might help me to teach.

That's when I saw it.

There was a folder with the unfortunate title *Sell Out: How to Make It in the Art Business*. Inside that folder was a 20-page book outline, as well as a complete art-business course syllabus.

I thought back to that fateful day at the gallery, when an artist arrived unannounced with his portfolio. I'd turned him away because his art wasn't right for me, and had made him cry. I was horrified, of course. But we'd spent all afternoon together looking at his work and discussing possible directions for him.

That moment had felt so meaningful to me. "Follow this..." it had whispered. But then this was forgotten, and I'd simply returned to work.

Or was it forgotten?

After the artist left, I'd been consumed by his questions. I'd started making notes about what I could share with other artists like him to help answer their questions. Eventually, I'd started writing the outline of a book. The university reached out to me about offering an art business course. I had put together the syllabus.

But then I got busy, and my attention was swallowed up by life again. The project was discarded – but it remained on my hard drive, like a tiny seed waiting to sprout.

For me to find it now, after all these years, when I needed it to badly, it's appearance felt like a magical sign:

Follow this...

My future became clearer. I could work as an artist who writes about being an artist. I could share my stories and pictures of other artists. I could help other people to work in the art

market by teaching them how. I could use their stories to inspire more. I could fill the world with working artists while creating my own world as a working artist.

Suddenly, I was no longer bankrupt. I was possessed by The Muse.

QUEST:

Have you ever identified with a failure or setback the way I identified with BANKRUPTCY?

We often carry labels that no longer serve us—some we've given ourselves, others imposed by society or loved ones. These outdated labels can hold us back from reaching our full potential. Take a moment to search your heart and reflect on any lingering labels that no longer suit who you are or who you want to become.

These labels might relate to various aspects of your life:

1. Financial status: Perhaps you've labeled yourself as "bad with money" or "always broke."
2. Career achievements: You might think of yourself as "underachieving" or "not successful enough."
3. Age: Labels like "too old to start over" or "too young to be taken seriously" can be limiting.
4. Education: As in my case, where my family considered my art degree to be "dumb-dumb" because it didn't fit their definition of academics.
5. Relationships: You might label yourself as "unlovable" or "destined to be alone."

It took me a long time to let go of the "impractical artist" label my family gave me. Recognizing and shedding these unhelpful labels is a crucial step in personal growth.

Now it's your turn: Take a few minutes to reflect and write down the old labels that no longer define you. Remember, acknowledging these outdated labels is the first step towards replacing them with more empowering beliefs about yourself.

Old labels that don't define me are:

And now, I want you to take great joy in crossing all them out.

You define you. Nothing else.

I don't care if you're a highbrow artist, a lowbrow artist, or something in between. I don't care if you've had an established career or you're just out the gate. My advice to you is going to be the same:

If you want to be a huge hit in the art world, the best thing you can do is to support other artists. That's right, you can read it again: If you want to be a huge hit in the art world, the best thing you can do is to support other artists.

Other artists are not your competition. They're not your rivals. Other artists are your colleagues, and by supporting them, you support yourself.

Let me explain.

In a recent survey of contemporary art galleries in New York City, it was confirmed that most artists whom galleries are showing were discovered through introductions. Galleries were introduced to new artists either through their collectors or through other artists.

And it's not just New York. When I ran the art studio, I got dozens of unsolicited submissions every single day from artists. It was overwhelming! I didn't have the time to even look at them.

So how did I find new artists? Mostly through other artists.

I've learned this is how it works in all creative industries, including for actors and writers. When you devote yourself to supporting other artists, you become an active part of an arts community. And the exchange of resources, information, and ideas in arts communities is vital.

Art doesn't live in a vacuum.

Being part of an arts community also gets your name known. It gets your work known. It can bring opportunities to you, inbound opportunities, instead of having to knock on every door.

Other artists will know when there's a call for proposals. They'll have an extra ticket to that museum event where all the collectors can be found.

Other artists will fill the gallery or the audience when you have a show. They'll spend real time with your art. Their support will matter because they will truly understand the amount of work involved and how important it is to have that work seen.

Other artists understand your victories and defeats. Other artists can help you solve your creative problems. Other artists are more likely to know people or be in situations that can benefit you. Not just that, but other artists will open you up to new ideas, and that's gold.

So be helpful to other artists, avoid the impulse to hold back and always honor the impulse to be as generous to your colleagues as you possibly can. And that includes buying their work.

Why would an artist collect another artist's work?

For all kinds of reasons. For friendship, to support others when they need it. In fact, I know a lot of blue-chip artists who immediately started helping other artists when they themselves made it big. It's a way of giving back.

And you don't have to wait until you're rich and famous to start your collection. What a lot of artists do, and I've done a lot of myself, is to trade art. I'll give you one of my pieces for one of yours. Trading your work with other artists gets it seen by a bigger audience than just your own.

It's a huge compliment when another artist shows interest in having your work, especially if they're taking inspiration from it.

So, for all these reasons, the best way to build a career as an artist is to support other artists. This is an investment that will always pay you back, exponentially.

John Reyes is the Director of Reyes Contemporary Art, and nobody knows the art business better than he. I asked John how artists can build their audience?

He spoke about visual artists who want gallery representation, but I think his advice is solid for all kinds of creatives: Get yourself out there and join a community you want to belong to.

John said:

“I understand that in this type of global art market, it's very difficult if you're not in a particular area to have physical connection with a gallery. But every artist should have a relationship with a gallery inside their hometown wherever that may be, even from the smallest to the largest.

“What I mean by that is even if you just go to their shows, eventually people will recognize you... The fact is that you've come to the shows says something about you as an artist.

“Because as an artist, you are also part of a community... You cannot live in this bubble called yourself and just paint in your studio.

“You need to go out. You need to make relationships. You need to foster dialogues with galleries that are out there. You become part of the social artistic fabric of the community. To me, the best artists who have really done well are those artists that have been social. Even if you're not that social as a creature, you need to become that way.”

Artists take leaps of faith each time they take on a new project or idea. Walter's advice to teach artists had taken hold of my imagination. I called my course "The Working Artist," and it would become a very big project.

"The Working Artist" began a daylong business bootcamp for artists. I was confident in the material but apprehensive about teaching for the first time. I pretended that my poor houseplant was an audience of artists while I practiced delivering the workshop for hours every day. Companion spent his days off patiently listening to me lecture about galleries and websites and sales techniques.

My first class was taught to three artists in the back closet of a provincial English gallery. For over 10 hours, I shared my true stories and heartfelt advice while answering their eager questions. The artists were like sponges, soaking it all in. I felt alive in a way that I'd never felt before.

When the three artists later contacted one another to organize a pop-up exhibition, I nearly burst with pride. My next class of artists spontaneously did the same. Soon artists in my little town were bragging of their success after taking "The Working Artist."

I took my show on the road, teaching artists throughout Great Britain. I then taught artists in the USA, and in Europe and South Africa.

My travels confirmed what I'd long suspected: the art world is one world. By and large, the professional rules are the same, the experiences are the same, and certainly the artists are the same.

We may each be beautifully unique, but we are united by the desire to create. We share the ability to see beyond where others stop. We follow voices and urges that others can't hear. We're endlessly curious. And we're committed to our work.

I fell in love with the creative spirit of every artist that I met.

“The Working Artist” wasn’t just the name of my workshop; it became the title I claimed for myself. My journey had come full circle. I had crafted a life where I could write, make photographs, and teach—just as Bill Jay had once promised, urging me to take that leap of faith so many years ago. And here I was, doing exactly that.

I had followed the signs, done the work, and over time, the feathers of doubt and uncertainty had transformed into wings – wings strong enough to carry me out of Rock Bottom and into the life I had always dreamed of.

And so, “The Working Artist” became more than just a workshop – it became my title.

The artist’s leap of faith isn’t just about reaching a destination; it’s about embracing the journey, the dive into the unknown with all its joys and sorrows. It’s about trusting that

challenges are here to serve you, and that each feather that you grow is bringing you closer to your true purpose.

Which isn't somewhere out there. It's been within you all along.

Post About That

From the start, I've always promoted "The Working Artist" through social media. I write short stories and essays about working as an artist and show my photographs with them. But too many times, I see artists post their images with only a title and a price. They don't engage their audience. They don't teach their audience how to see their work.

If I had simply posted the date and time of each Working Artist course, no one would have ever come. Instead, I freely shared stories about my journey in the art world and those of other artists. I wrote of lessons learned. I gave away resources.

This is how you can build an audience for your work too. Think about what your work is about – whether it's subject matter, style, or technique. What's the golden thread that ties your work together and makes it yours?

Post about that.

For example, I worked with a digital artist who created landscape images, seascapes, and film stills. He asked me about his social media strategy. He'd been posting images of his work with a size and price like everyone else. This was greeted with a collective yawn.

We spoke about his subject matter, but it quickly became apparent that his true passion was for digital media. He simply loved working digitally. I suggested that his golden thread, was the fact that he worked digitally instead of traditionally.

"Post about that," I told him.

By teaching and showing and sharing posts about digital art, something he was passionate about, he'd build a relationship of trust with his audience. When he did share his work, they would have already been educated as to how to view it. People who are interested in digital art will be drawn to him. Through sharing the work of other digital artists, he'd be recognized as a leader and participate in a larger community.

And that's exactly what happened. Within a few months, he was invited to several exhibitions, including a digital art museum. He built a loyal following and attracted wonderful opportunities.

What's your golden thread?

Post about that.

FEATHER NINE. QUEST 2:

234

Let's find your Golden Thread. Consider these questions:

- What are those subjects that you could talk about all day long?
- What are those things that people always seem to see in your work?
- Is it your medium? Your subject matter? Your colors? Your heart? Your story?
- What makes your work uniquely yours?

"Dear Crista," the email began. "How can I achieve a high level of success in the art world?"

Ah! The elusive "high level of success." Artists ask me about it all the time. And this is what I say: You'll never get there.

I say that because once you attain what seems like success to you now, you'll most probably want more. There's nothing wrong with wanting more but be careful not to live there. It's like eating delicious food but never swallowing – it doesn't feed you.

A millionaire friend was recently whining about not having enough money. "But you're rich." I reminded him.

"No," he corrected me, "I'm *comfortably* poor."

He enthusiastically described a fabulous new private jet that "everybody" aspires to. Yes, apparently there are people having conversations about which private jet they want.

He explained to me, "There are truly rich people, those who can afford that jet. And those of us who can't afford the jet. We're forced to settle for lesser jets. We're what I call comfortably poor."

I wanted to smack him.

But his story reminded me that gratitude is more satisfying than greed. It's important to stay focused on what Is Enough and not focus on Not Enough.

Artists often tell me, "I want to make a million dollars a year from the sale of my work."

My first question is "Why a million?"

Usually, it's an arbitrary number that they've emotionally attached their worth to. "If I make a million dollars a year, it means I'm a great artist."

No. It means that you're a busy artist and a great marketer.

I know an artist who makes the big money. She spends it too – a huge mansion, horses, fancy cars. To support it all she works, literally, from the time she wakes until bedtime. Her husband cooks dinner when he comes home from the office, and they'll watch a few hours of TV – but she never stops painting. She paints in front of the TV too.

She complains how long it's been since she created work that really interests her. Or taken a vacation. Instead, she's fulfilling a demand to support a lifestyle. She doesn't know how long her 15 minutes of fame will last but she's determined to see it through, at the expense of her passion, health, and relationships.

I'm not saying that this is what happens to all artists when they become collectable. But I am saying that working as a slave to big numbers is a difficult road to travel. Money is not always the road to freedom.

To be honest, I know very few artists who are truly motivated by money.

What most artists are motivated by is a strong desire to spend more time in the studio creating and sharing. They want their work to be significant. They want their work to be seen and respected. Is that what motivates you?

So how do you achieve a "high level of success" in the art world? You work for love. You work for your audience. You work for The Muse.

You work for it.

I get a lot of questions from artists that I answer with the same two words. I'm sure artists want to throttle me when I say these two words but, in fact, these two words are the best way I know to answer the questions.

For example:

Should I sell my work online? *It depends.*

How much should I charge for my work? *It depends.*

What social media platform should I use? *It depends.*

Where can I find my audience of art collectors? *It depends.*

I don't use those two words to avoid answering the questions. It's the truth: *It depends.*

There is no right or wrong in art. We all want easy answers, a clear sense of direction. That's the point. Your work provides direction. Go back to your work for the answer.

Because it's from your work that you'll find your audience, your brand, your message, your prices, your strategy. The answers to your questions are found within your practice, your work and your studio – not outside of it. They begin with you.

That's why it's important to start by diving deep into who you are as an artist, to be honest about where you are, what you want and why.

This is what being an artist is all about – finding the answers to the questions.

And how are you supposed to find the answers? If you ask me – it depends.

In today's new economy the dynamic has shifted. Currency is often measured in relationships: how many and how deep. And you build these relationships by sharing. It's all about connection.

Relationships can take place on social media, in your community, at your studio, through clients and fans and supporters and friends and family. The list goes on and on. What and how you share depends on you and your work.

I meet artists who scoff at this idea, who tell me that they're going to get a gallery to do all this stuff for them. They just want to make stuff. Yes, they want to sell it, but they don't want to invest in relationships.

That model may have worked before, but it doesn't work now.

Today, I know several artists who were coddled by galleries for their entire career, but when those galleries closed for one reason or another, the artists lost everything. They were left with no client list, no idea who their collectors were, no conversations to resume, no relationships.

If you haven't already, start building your relationships now. From your relationships will come your audience. From your audience will come your opportunities. From your opportunities will come your sales.

See how it's all connected?

FEATHER NINE. QUEST 3:

Let's do a relationship check. Which, if any, social media platforms do you use?

Are you making real connections or just posting?

Do you have a mailing list of supporters interested in your work?

Are you engaging with them or just trying to get them to buy your stuff?

If relationships are your currency, are you rich or poor?

Where can you invest to be more affluent?

I've always been very curious about the digital world. After leaving the art business world, I wanted to find my place online. I spent hundreds of hours in that cold English basement teaching myself about technology and what possibilities existed in the online ecosystem for creative people.

The idea of filming "The Working Artist" and bringing it online was making more and more sense to me. I envisioned myself filling the world with working artists. Wouldn't that be cool?

Crowdfunding seemed the best option. Crowdfunding, if you don't know, is a way to raise money by collecting small contributions from a large number of people. It's a popular way to fund a specific project, product, or cause. Basically, you're asking your audience to give you money for your project.

Because I had no money and no credit, crowdfunding was actually my only option. And every time I thought about taking on this project, from the funding to filming to creating an online learning program, I felt sick. In fact, I was terrified.

The monster named Not Enough chanted The Fear Song over and over:

What if there's Not Enough money?

What if there's Not Enough artists?

What if I'm Not Enough to do this?

But I worked to move past it. Instead, I made a list of reasons why it would succeed. I put in months of preparation building my audience of artists, listening to their needs, and sharing my work with them.

Then I jumped and asked them to catch me by funding “The Working Artist” crowdfunding campaign.

It was exhausting. It was also humiliating, as asking for money often is. I was putting myself forward in a public way like I had never done before. Artists from around the world said yes. Lots said no. Some were unkind, others downright rude. I just pushed through, fueled by my passion.

My campaign was one-month long and toward the end of that month, I was physically and emotionally spent. I was close to my goal but not close enough. I was afraid that Not Enough was winning and my failure would mean public humiliation.

One day toward the end of the campaign, I was riding my bike down a hill when something caught my eye. A little boy was drawing with chalk on a concrete wall.

I love to photograph artists at work wherever I am, so even though I had a multitude of tasks for the campaign waiting for me back home, I stopped my bike.

"I've seen you before," the little boy said as he continued drawing. "You're always on your bicycle and you take lots of pictures. Don't you have a job?"

I told him that I'm a writer and photographer. He looked at me, impressed, "I want to be like you when I grow up."

Like me? What's that?

"An artist," he smiled.

He showed me some of his other, earlier, chalk drawings along the wall. There was a large piece called "People Pasture" of a unicorn eating people. But he stopped me from photographing it. "That's not my best work," he said gravely.

His name was Harrison, and he was 8-years old.

His drawings filled the walls with their childlike graffiti: he'd even written poetry: "Faith. Justice. Believers matter."

He confessed to me that sometimes he had doubts about his work. We sat on the ground together to talk. Harrison wanted to be a famous artist. He spent all his time learning about art and artists. He loved going to museums and galleries. And he dreamt of seeing his own stuff there one day.

Harrison told me how it hurts when people don't like what he does. I pointed him back to his own words: "Believers matter."

I told him what it is to be an artist. I explained how it's important to always take chances, that he must strive to make his life an expression of his work, of himself. We spoke of integrity.

He gobbled up my words like they were candy.

I told him how fame is a false prophet. I explained that his life's work, as an artist, will be to develop that spirit that lies inside and look for ways to express it, leaving everyplace he goes more beautiful for him having been there.

"Like you do with these walls," I told him.

Harrison said, "I'm so lucky to meet you."

But it was me who was blessed. I wished that I could offer him something, a gift to remember who he is. Like a badge that he could wear all the time to protect him when the world didn't understand. I wished I could give Harrison a great big ARTIST badge. In fact, I wished I could give every artist in the world an ARTIST badge.

And this is where the ARTIST badge was born.

When I incorporated Harrison's story into my crowdfunding campaign, the response was astounding. Artists from around the world saw themselves in this thoughtful young creator, and they rallied to make my dream a reality – some even donating twice. It was Harrison's tale, told

through the lens of our serendipitous encounter, that propelled me across the finish line and brought “The Working Artist” to life.

Now, whenever I look at the ARTIST badge that was born from our chance meeting, I'm reminded of Harrison and all the artists I've met over the years since. Whether online or in person, we've touched each other; through our work, our stories, and our hearts.

And I remember the two words of Harrison's poem: Believers matter.

There's a lot of myths around art and one of them is perpetuated by artists themselves. They say, "I don't need to talk about my art because my art speaks for itself." It does not.

We discussed this when we worked on your Artist Statement. Your job as an artist is to make the work. Your job as a working artist is to sell your work. You do that by using your words.

Words connect you with other people. Those people could belong to your audience. You won't know unless you connect with them, using words.

When I was an art dealer, I planned to introduce a young collector to an artist whose work I thought she might like. The three of us went to lunch. She and I chatted while he sulked. I was angry and she was uncomfortable.

Finally, she gathered the courage to ask him, "Tell me, what's your work like?"

He shrugged. "I dunno. I used to work in oils... now I work in acrylic."

And that was it! That was all he said! The potential collector was already anxious about meeting an artist because she was outside of her comfort zone. Now she felt shamed and stupid.

We use our words to connect with people, and we also use words to teach those people how to look at our work. Words help us to reveal our motivations, to understand our

personal language of symbols, gestures, and signs. Using words, we can share our ideas, our obsessions, our process, our inspiration, and sometimes even our fears.

Art is how we share our humanity.

Sometimes the people who don't know your art might need help to understand it. This is where artist statements, websites, and social media posts can help. Use these spaces to teach people about your work and where it comes from. Never try to make them guess. Never shame them for not understanding, it's your job to help them understand.

An art curator recently told me about a museum show she went to. There were two artists showing and each had their own side of the gallery. One artist had included thoughtful wall labels for each of the pieces. The other artist had none. He allowed the work to speak for itself.

Even though this woman had a deep knowledge of art, she told me that she spent most of her time with the work that had the labels. She found the labels helped her to go deeper into the work than she could have on her own. She even looked this artist up and joined his mailing list.

And the other artist's show? She couldn't even remember that artist's name. She'd breezed right past the pieces; they'd left no impression.

We see this on social media all the time. People just post a picture with a title and a price. Maybe a size if they get fancy.

Don't just post a picture and ask people to buy stuff. Use your words – and anything else you have – to build real relationships with real people. And then nurture those relationships in real ways.

This is the real secret to professional success.

I know that it's sometimes difficult to know who your people are, who makes up your audience. Artists ask me about this a lot.

Your audience can be comprised of anyone who likes your work. And you build your audience by finding appreciative admirers.

So, who are the people who like your work? What do they most appreciate about it?

If you don't know, find out. The next time that someone compliments your work, ask them questions. You want to learn what it is about your work that speaks to people. You also want to be very gentle in your questioning because you don't want to make anyone feel stupid or put on the spot.

At the same time, you want to learn more about them. After all, these are your people. The only way to find more is to understand who they are.

If you're a visual artist, you might ask if they have an art collection? What kind of work are they most drawn to? Why? Do they go to art fairs or belong to museums? Who's their favorite artist?

There are really a hundred directions you can take your questions, but the most important thing is to truly listen to their answers. This will not only teach you about them, your audience, but it will also endear you to them. People love being heard.

So, when selling your art, yes, use your words. But use them as tools to build your audience too. Ask questions, then really listen to what people say. This does double duty – you learn about your audience and make them feel heard. Win-win.

Remember, every chat is a chance to connect. Whether it's at a gallery opening or in an Instagram DM, these conversations are gold. They help you understand who vibes with your work and why.

In the end, it's not just about selling a piece. It's about creating a community around your art. And that starts with genuine curiosity about the folks who dig what you do.

One of My Favorite Writers is Seth Godin

I've been reading his stuff for years now because I've found so much value in his wisdom about marketing as a creative in this new economy.

After starting "The Working Artist," life began throwing me some of my own marketing challenges. I didn't know what to do. I wished I could ask Seth Godin about it. Seth Godin would know what to do. He always had the answers.

And then I got an invitation to the "Smart Hustle Small Business Conference" in New York City. And the invitation said, "If you come to the conference, you'll have an opportunity to ask Seth Godin himself a question."

I bought my ticket on the spot. I was going to New York City to ask Seth Godin a question!

I was so ready for this.

As I headed toward the Smart Hustle Small Business Conference, mentally practicing how I was going to ask Seth Godin my question, I knew I was ready, yet the pressure I put on myself was immense.

"Don't blow it, Crista." I told myself over and over through clenched teeth. "Everything rides on this question."

Do you ever do that? Do you ever start bossing The Universe around? Do you ever start demanding that it follow your narrative instead of allowing life to reveal its own?

As I hustled down that busy city street, I caught sight of an elderly man sitting in a dingy diner. He was hunched over, gazing sadly out the window as the world rushed by.

I passed him by but then I stopped. I turned back. I put my hand on the window in front of the old man – and I smiled at him.

His eyes rose to meet mine. And then he slowly raised a shaky hand to the dirty window. Through the cold glass, I could feel his warmth and he could feel mine. We looked into one another's eyes, and we smiled, letting the world rush past.

I can't tell you how long that moment lasted, but I knew that I'd never forget it.

As I continued walking toward the Smart Hustle Small Business Conference to ask Seth Godin my question, I felt a weight lift. What if I hadn't come to New York City to ask Seth Godin a question? What if my mission was to make that old man smile?

What would that say about my work? What would that say about the success of this trip? What would Mr. Seth Godin say about that?

I sat front and center at the Smart Hustle Small Business Conference, so that when Seth Godin spoke, I could be the first to ask him my question.

At a break between speakers, I stepped outside to stretch my legs. And guess who was walking into the building? That's right. Seth Godin! Swear to God.

I froze for a second, but I told myself that this was my chance. So, I introduced myself. I was really nervous. But instead of asking my question, I found myself reaching into my bag and pulling out a dog-eared copy of one of his books. It was full of those sticky tabs marking all the ideas that I wanted to remember.

I showed it to Seth Godin and said, "Your work has inspired me for years. I came to New York City to say thank you." And then, I had the privilege of shaking Seth Godin's hand.

When I went back to my chair, I felt elated.

Seth Godin took the stage, and he spoke about the ways that the economy has changed recently, and the new ways the world is doing business. He gave us what he said was the recipe for success in today's market.

"Start with what you can give. And end there."

Start with what you can give. And end there. I love that.

I never did ask Seth Godin my question. Yet I felt like I'd been given the answer.

The recipe for success is about seeing others. And letting them see you.

It's about showing your gratitude, and not your need.

It's about allowing the answers to reveal themselves, instead of dictating their terms.

It's about starting with what you can give. And ending there.

I'm so grateful to Seth Godin for answering my question.

Feather Ten: Walking in Faith

Faith is the opposite of anxiety.

We all know what anxiety feels like. It's Not Enough after he's had a few drinks. But faith feels like Enough. You will be enough. You will have enough. You will do enough. You are good enough.

Faith is how we began our journey together when you took that jump, and you continued to build your faith with each feather. You developed faith in The Muse. You developed faith in yourself, faith in your work.

With growing your first feather, it took faith to claim the artist you are, to be yourself in a world that pushes for sameness. Only the faithful answer the call to adventure. You couldn't always see the way, but you learned to trust your inner compass.

You learned to face your fears and have faith in action. You faithfully developed your craft and your voice in your next feathers. As your confidence grew, you took bigger chances. You faced down obstacles and monsters with that resolute faith and persistence.

Failure was where you found faith on your knees. You learned that faith is always there when you ask, giving you the gift of resilience. And then you shared what you learned on your journey with others, the faithful.

Faith is our last feather because the journey is a spiral. You will shed your feathers and grow new wings again, Artist.

The more times you shed in an honor to growth, the deeper and more beautiful your transformative wings will grow and the higher you shall fly. It will be reflected in your work, in your life, and in yourself.

FEATHER TEN. QUEST 1:

Faith is the opposite of anxiety. For this feather's growth, it's important that we take control of anxiety once and for all.

Can you identify a source of anxiety in your life right now?

What steps can you take to manage the situation?

And more importantly, what can you do to control your response to the anxiety? Are there practices, such as meditation or walking or professional therapy, that you can put in place to move past it?

Dream Big. Live Larger.

The words on the billboard made me do a double take. They were advertising a new film, and my first inclination was to laugh them off as just advertising. But then I found myself staring at the words, inspired by their inherent wisdom.

Dream Big. Live Larger.

I think there's something here for artists. Dreaming big is something we all do, whether we keep our light hidden, or we announce our dreams loudly to The Universe.

Either way, as artists we all want our work to be seen, to connect with others. We want to be respected for our talent and ideas. And this is a big dream.

The key, I believe, is in the "living larger" part.

You see, too often we do hide our light. We work and work and work at developing our craft. We stretch and grow and mature our vision.

But we live too small, waiting for outside validation, waiting for the world to tell us when we can live large. When we can wear the ARTIST badge.

But that's not the world's job.

Living large isn't about fast cars and fancy houses. It's not about sold out shows and becoming famous. It's about taking pride in the work – not in the response to the work. It's about doing the work.

Living large is about living with authenticity. It's about flying your Freak Flag high, owning who you are and what you believe to be true. It's about giving others permission to do the same.

It's about growing as a human being, a craftsman, and a thinker. It's about basing your feelings of success on your efforts and your work. Living large is about not living small.

It's about faith.

Dream Big. Live Larger.

FEATHER TEN. QUEST 2:

How can you live larger now so that you can grow into your Big Dream?

Have you ever felt like your relationships weren't connecting, your creativity wasn't flowing, and life just keeps getting in your way? Have you ever felt overwhelmed? Or struggled to keep the faith?

One day, when I was feeling all the above, I turned to my friend Andrew David Smith. I'd shared my angst with him, pouring out all my frustrations and fears.

And Andy responded, "It sounds like your be-ing is coming from your do- ing,"

My what?

"Your be-ing is coming from your do-ing. You have it backwards. For your do-ing should always come from your be-ing."

I was so moved by his words that I wrote them down. "My doing should come from my being."

But what does that mean?

It means that the work you do – well, everything you do – should come from the essence of who you are. It should tell the truth, be authentic, reveal your vulnerabilities, celebrate your strengths, share your story.

As artists, this is where our best ideas come from. This is where we encounter the flow.

Too often we get hung up on productivity and results. We stubbornly cling to the timetables and outcomes we want. And we forget that it's all about faith in the process. We forget to allow.

When you start to define yourself by the results of your work, by agendas you set, when you begin to believe the hype, or worse, internalize your failures, you lose your faith.

Your be-ing has started to come from your do-ing. And this is when we find ourselves struggling.

Andy was right. The best work comes from within.

Artists hear this all the time. There's a preconceived notion that we spend all our time thinking and learning and dreaming and making. That it's fun to be an artist.

Which is true.

But because making art is more fun than their jobs, it's suspect.

What they don't see are the sacrifices made, job security and dependable income for starters. They don't see the fears we overcome as we cling to faith. They don't see the challenges faced, nor the sheer amount of effort behind each piece.

It's hard work. It's focused devotion.

I've learned that by working for something you believe in – by sharing your passion and exhibiting your commitment – other people are drawn to help you. This is where faith pays off.

I can't begin to tell you how many people have helped “The Working Artist” along the way. Angels, every one of them.

But faith always begins with work. The Universe needs you to make the first move – to jump, to take the leap of faith.

The young woman had reached out to me on social media. Though we'd never met before, it felt just as exciting as meeting a long-lost friend.

She'd read my stories about the first artist I ever met. Andy was my first real teacher. He was a blind man, who taught me how to see. "He was my father," she said in her message.

I knew that Andy had a daughter, and that he'd lost his way after he lost her. That's when I lost touch with him.

Andy had raised his daughter until she was 10 years old, until that horrible night when her mother took her away from him forever. The young woman told me that she never saw her father again – but she'd never stopped looking.

Now she was a young woman, wanting to know more of this man whose tender memory still burned in her heart. She heard he'd passed from cancer years before. I had heard the same. We both mourned the loss.

As fate would have it, she and I would both be in Phoenix the following month. We wanted to meet.

I knew her straight away. Her face glowed with the same beautiful energy as Andy's. I whispered to my friend's ghost, "I wish you could see this beautiful girl. And she's an artist – just like you!"

She was hungry to know about her father. I was honored to share my memories of this remarkable man. I told her how he had opened my eyes to see the world more deeply. I cried as I spoke, overcome by sadness that Andy was not there instead of me.

But then the young woman said that she felt he might still be alive. She felt it, she said.

She showed me a clue, and then another. Could be possible? Before we knew it, we were in my car, driving like mad to the last place she was able to trace him.

This was the last place I ever expected to find Andy, to be honest. It was an ugly, decayed makeshift neighborhood cobbled together under a bridge. Behind weary chain link fences, big dogs growled menacingly. "Andy," I cried, "What happened to you?"

She pointed to a grim structure that was all boarded up. We peeked into its fenced off backyard, strewn with trash and overrun by weeds. We both closed our eyes in pain.

But then she saw something, "Look!"

In the back corner there was the crumbling skeleton of a raised garden bed and next to it, someone had painted a giant peace sign on the tree.

That could only be Andy.

We high-fived. "He was here! He left a sign!"

We knocked on neighbors' doors, terrified. Most didn't answer. Other slammed the door in our face, afraid we were cops.

Only one man would speak to us. Andrew had been there, he said. But we were too late now. Andrew was gone.

He told us that Andrew drank. A lot. He'd been taken away a long time ago, gravely ill. Probably didn't make it.

I never knew Andy to take a drink. But I knew that losing his daughter would have left him hopeless.

My own father died of drink. The fact that I was never able to say goodbye has always haunted me. I looked at my friend's beautiful daughter and vowed to give her story a different ending.

We studied the clues again and were able to piece together enough to find his family. "Smith" is not an easy name to track. "It may be too late," I warned her, but I prayed that her story would have a happy ending.

I found Andy's brother, and tears came when he assured us that Andy had indeed recovered from his ordeal and was once again thriving. Soon, the young woman was embraced by her long-lost family. I celebrated the happy ending.

A few nights later, my own phone rang. A once-familiar voice said, "Hello Crista? It's me, Andy."

It turned out that Andy was living close to my parent's house where I was visiting. We rekindled our friendship once again.

He showed me his new art. He told me proudly of his job teaching art at the local senior center.

"Can't they see that their art teacher is blind?" I joked. He laughed. I'm sure that Andy was an excellent art teacher. His life and work itself had always been about teaching people to look more deeply.

Not long after, Andy's cancer returned, and it took him away. "He was at peace," I was told when the time came.

I rode my bike to Andy's Island, that beautiful spot he'd created by patiently laying rocks while he was in high school. I began to cry.

As I sit on Andy's Island now, writing these words to you, it's clear that even though he was blinded as a child, Andy always saw a vision. As an artist and a spiritual seeker, he had been true to that vision.

And just as the boulders he lay down each day when he was a teenager would eventually become a flourishing island, the seeds of wisdom and love and beauty that Andy spread during his life had blossomed as well.

Goodbye, my remarkable friend. Thank you for all you've given me.

"It's not goodbye," I hear Andy whisper. "I'm always here. You just have to look for me. Open your eyes."

ARTIST INTERVIEW:

Kiki Smith has worked hard to have the massive success that her art career enjoys, yet she freely shares the wisdom of her experience:

“One has to be willing to live with the uncertainty. You have to follow your work, where your works wants to go. You have to be willing to do that in a really unconditional way. And have faith that this brings you closer to yourself – and also takes care of you.”

For years I thought I was chasing success. Money, power, access and inclusion are the keys to the kingdom, right?

Turns out the answer is no. The key to the kingdom is significance.

Significance isn't about chasing fame – it's about starring in your own life. Measured by your self-worth, not your net worth. Famous for what you share, not what you've got.

Be the star in your own life.

Listen, we all want our piece of the pie. There's nothing wrong with wanting to have a lot of pie. But why do you want what you want?

Do you want a lot so you can get a lot? Or give a lot?

Because when you have the faith to truly offer your work to something bigger than yourself, everything will change. When you look for opportunities to serve, doors will open. You can let go of control and allow The Muse to guide you.

Your voice is beautiful. As an artist, you're being called to share that voice. Answer the call by singing your song strong and true.

Will you be lonely? Sometimes, yes.

But you won't walk alone. The Muse is there. And all the artists who came before you too. Look at their work often – it points the way.

Have faith in the fact that you will achieve your dreams. You will return from your journey with the holy grail. You will share what you've learned.

And then The Muse will whisper “Follow This,” and you will jump again. Higher and higher.

Tailwinds and Turbulence

Being here now, saying these words to you, is a culmination of my jump. This is everything I've worked for.

Even though I lost the relationship with my sweet funny Companion along the way, I've achieved my dreams. Today I am a writer. I am a photographer. And I am a teacher.

This is exactly what I aimed toward when I began my artist's journey, but it's been a totally different dance than anything I could have ever imagined for myself back then.

It doesn't matter how you choose to move to your Artist's Dance. What's important is that you support yourself, your reality, and your energy. And understand that however you choose to dance right now doesn't have to be forever. You can always change your tune.

You don't have to follow my footsteps, nor any other artist's footsteps. You don't have to travel. You don't have to quit your job. You certainly don't have to feel you're doing it gracefully all the time.

Your journey reflects the circumstances of your life, your dreams, your faith.

Some people can balance the day job and art career at the same time. Others can't. Still others won't.

Some people quit making art because the marketplace doesn't offer the freedom they thought it would. Many don't want to do the work. And then there are those artists who keep waiting for the road to be clear, for the path to be perfect. They never move.

Make peace with your Artist's Dance. Find balance in your work, and your life will make for smooth travels and more energy to focus.

At the end of the day, it doesn't matter how fast you go nor how long it takes. What matters is that you keep growing your feathers.

Where do you start?

Follow the work that has the most meaning, while holding tight to the faith that it will take you where you need to go.

The last time that I saw Bill Jay, we'd met for a cup of tea in London. Bill was being honored by the Royal Photographic Society for his contributions to the field of photography. Still suffering from the effects of the rattlesnake venom, this warranted a rare excursion for him.

We were sitting in London's Russell Square, with its grand trees and green lawns. Bill became nostalgic as memories came flooding back from his youth in England.

He reminisced about the 1960's, when he and his friends were young long-haired photographers, ready to take on the establishment and give the world a real kick up the arts.

Back then, photography was just starting to push its way into the art world. Bill and his friends wanted to push it even harder. Bill told me they'd posted signs on all the trees of Russell Square announcing, "Photography IS an art!"

It made me laugh then, and it makes me laugh now. I think the trees probably still get a chuckle out of it too.

I'm not sure how effective posting signs on trees turned out to be in the history of the medium, but the fact is that photography has become accepted as an art form. And according to the numerous awards he's received, Bill's contributions had a lot to do with it.

That bold young lad would go on to become the founding editor of Creative Camera magazine during its most seminal years. It's been said that under Bill's leadership, *Creative Camera*

magazine was a major influence on the British photography world, one of the first to showcase the art of the medium.

But it came at a cost. The publisher wanted more traditional imagery. He and Bill clashed constantly and after a few years Bill was fired.

Never the sort of man to stay down, Bill founded another magazine, *Album*. I can only describe *Album* as *Creative Camera* on steroids. It was both stunning and hugely influential.

And it went bankrupt after one year. Another failure.

Though Bill's world had fallen apart, he didn't realize then that one day both of those magazines would become highly collectable. In fact, it was those so-called failures at the start of his career that led to his eventual honor by the Royal Photographic Society at the end of it.

Sometimes our biggest failures lead to our greatest victories.

Drowning in debt and shame after the closure of *Album*, Bill received a lifeline from The Universe. An esteemed American photographic historian, named Van Deren Coke, had come to London to give a talk. Van was impressed by Bill's enthusiasm and curiosity. He saw Bill's failures as knowledge and experience.

Van Deren Coke was starting a new Photographic Studies department at the university where he taught in America. He invited Bill to study with him, offering to arrange a full scholarship based on the merit of Bill's previous work – the work that the rest of the world had defined as a failure.

Van told Bill what this new future could look like if he got his degree in Photographic Studies. Van said, "You can write. You can make photographs. And you can teach."

There are those two words again: You can.

Bill had the faith. And because Bill jumped, life placed him in my path so that I would one day have the faith to jump too. And because I jumped, I'm now saying these words to you.

You can...

My dear Artist, you've jumped! You have the wings, and you've earned each feather that you wear. Even if you fell down sometimes, you dared to undertake this journey and that's huge.

As you look back at yourself and your practice, note what you've learned or accomplished since we began walking together. Your achievements may feel small or huge, they're all important.

No matter how uncomfortable it may feel at times, never doubt that you deserve to wear the ARTIST badge. Let this truth of your be-ing inform your do-ing.

Keep the faith in your work and your Self. You are powerful, graceful, and free, so continue to dare to fly higher and higher. Artists never stop growing.

It's been an honor to take this journey with you.

RITUAL:

For this last feather, we're going to perform a little magic. I want you to create a ritual to celebrate your faith.

Write your plans and dreams on a sheet of paper. As many or as few as you want. As ambitious as you dare. Get it all down on paper.

Then burn it, bury it, or tear it into a million pieces and throw it to the wind. Chew it up and swallow it if you want. Choose the ritual that's most meaningful to you.

And as you perform this ritual, I want you to smile, that's right, smile. Because you know how to make these dreams come true. Because you know how to do the work. Because you know that by owning your dreams, you're hearing the sacred voice of The Muse as she whispers to you once again:

Follow this...