

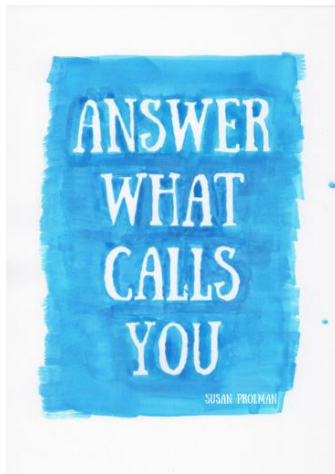
THE ARTIST'S MIND

How to Shift Your Thinking to Ease into Creative Expression



by Susan Prolman

Should you draw, paint, or otherwise create artistic works? Answer what calls you. If creating art calls to you clearly enough that you spend time on this rather than the many other endeavors vying for your attention and energy, then, yes. You should.



Composite scenario: Have you experienced something like this?

I want to create. I buy art supplies. I attend a class. I try hard. Nothing comes together. I feel that everything I make looks like bad teenage art, inaccurate and unattractive. The student next to me creates beautiful works of art quickly and seemingly effortlessly. The instructor praises him. At the end, each person shares her art with the rest of the class. It seems that everyone else's is better than mine. It's embarrassing. I think they're naturally artistically talented. I'm not. I should spend my time on other areas where I can succeed. I stop creating art.

How to Begin

Like many seeking to resurrect creative expression, I experienced a good bit of initial frustration. I therefore plunged into a study of how people improve their skills to become better artists. Here's a summary of what I've learned so far. I'll focus mainly on drawing, but many points apply to creative endeavors more broadly.

After I began studying artistic process and mindset, I heard a frustrated fellow student say at the end of a class, "I guess I'm just not talented." Hearing her say this wrenched my heart, even though earlier I had thought the same thing about myself.

I sought guidance from accomplished artists. Washington, DC painter Dana Ellyn gave simple but sage advice. When I asked her how she learned to paint, she explained that if you put enough effort into it, you can do it.

Begin by dispelling the idea that some people have – and some people don't have – natural artistic talent. Artistic techniques and concepts are learnable. If you seek out good instruction and you are willing to practice the techniques, with time you can create beautiful work.



Painting by Elle Luna

You Can't Fail

Even the masters aren't perfect. There are aspects of drawing and painting that come hard for them too.

Pablo Picasso had Gertrude Stein sit for her portrait 90 times in the winter of 1905-06. He couldn't get her face right, so he left it blank. Later, he returned to his studio and painted the face without her there. Upon completion, the painting was criticized because it didn't look like Gertrude Stein. "She will," Picasso responded. Stein agreed.



Years ago, I attended a talk by Maurice Sendak. He told us about his creation of *Where the Wild Things Are*. He wanted Max to visit a land of horses. He said he tried but couldn't draw horses right, so he gave up and made the wild things monsters. *Where the Wild Things Are* is regarded as one of the finest children's books of all times. Take a close look at his hatching and crosshatching in these drawings. It is genius.



Don't beat yourself up when you struggle with artwork. Picasso did.

Sendak did. Everyone does at times. Please don't tell yourself, "I'm not naturally talented at art." You can't fail. Even when nothing goes right.

I've developed an approach to set myself up for success while reaching for new drawing skills. I try to experiment with something I've never done before, but something I feel I am ready to learn. I think of this as reaching for low hanging fruit. That way, I'm expanding my skill set while reducing frustration.

I also try my hand at a great number of designs and approaches to get a better sense of what works and what doesn't. I think of Johnny Appleseed. He scattered a lot of seeds over a large geographical area with the understanding that most will not take root - but some will.

Perfectionism and frustration go hand in hand. Perfection is an impossible goal. Not only can you not create perfect artwork, it wouldn't necessarily be a good thing if you could. **wabi-sabi** is a Japanese phrase expressing the beauty inherent in imperfection. Natural imperfections inevitable in artwork crafted by hand convey a feeling of authenticity, simplicity, and spirit that factory and computer made items often lack. Sometimes, after I draw or paint an image, I see the flaws in it. I do it a second time, correcting the earlier errors. I frequently like the first version better.



Failure is inevitable, and **it's not a big deal**. It's a natural part of the learning process. Some days, I spend hours working through several iterations of what I want to create. None turn out to my satisfaction, even when I thought I was setting myself up for success. Other days, my first project turns out just as I hoped. Both experiences are equally valid. Where you are now—this point on the creative journey of acquiring artistic skills—is just as valid as where you will be when you are more technically proficient.

The stakes are low. "You get a great idea, you go through the hard work of executing the idea, and then you release the idea out into the world, coming to win, lose, or draw," writes Austin Kleon in his book, *Show Your Work!* "Sometimes the idea succeeds, sometimes it fails, and more often than not, it does nothing at all."

Don't worry that people won't like your work. Others' criticisms are about them, not you. Writer Elizabeth Gilbert makes the point that you don't need anyone else's permission to create. **You don't even need their comprehension.** She says create something, anything because motion beats inertia.



There's an expression, life is short. My expression is, life is long. Don't worry that it's too late to start. Daisy Loongkoonan, an Aboriginal Australian artist, began painting in her mid-nineties. A decade later, she has over 300 hundred paintings in her collection and is celebrated around

the world. Start as soon as you are ready. If now is not the right time for you, that's ok. If it is, don't hold yourself back.

Have fun with it. I met a professional landscape photographer who creates beautiful work. I asked him if uses a tripod. He responded, "No, that would suck the joy out of it."

It's easier now than ever to learn to improve your artistic skills. You don't even need much money. There are wonderful books that teach art techniques available through the public library. There are free instructional videos on YouTube and elsewhere. There are free academic courses on-line. A museum near you may offer free hands-on art education sessions.

It's also easier now than ever to connect with other creators through Meet Up groups and other gatherings. If there's no social group in your area, start one.

I have found that concrete instruction makes my work better. Some examples:

- Draw locks, not individual strands of hair.
- In adults, eyes are located half way between the top of the skull and the bottom of the chin.
- To draw better circles, print out a set of perfect concentric circles. Practice running your pencil over each of them.
- Draw from a single view. Art instructor Betty Edwards observes that students sometimes bend their heads to the side to see something they couldn't see in their original position. This won't result in a realistic drawing. If you can't see it from the perspective you chose at the start, don't draw it.
- You can learn a lot from copy the work of great artists.

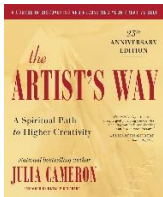
Tools help. Professional artists use tools to make their work easier, and so can you. A trip to the art supply store is my current version of being a kid in a candy store. A picture plane for perspective, a lightbox for copying, and eraser pencils for fine erasing are some of my favorite recent acquisitions.

"LET YOURSELF BE
SILENTLY DRAWN
BY THE STRANGE PULL
OF WHAT YOU REALLY
LOVE.
IT WILL NOT LEAD YOU ASTRAY."
RUMI

Painting by Elle Luna

I'm still new at this. I'm still learning. I'm enjoying expressing creativity by answering what calls me.

Julia Cameron's The Artist's Way



I love Elizabeth Gilbert's book, *Big Magic, Creative Living Beyond Fear*. It reads like a more contemporary, accessible companion to Julia Cameron's

The Artist's Way, A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity. *The Artist's Way* is not for everyone. It may register as dated. Some may not embrace Cameron's spiritual explorations. Despite this, I found the many of Cameron's observations to be profound and helpful.

Here are some highlights that particularly resonated with me.

Everyone has creativity.

Creativity is frightening. We resist it.

We throw blocks in our path to maintain the illusion of control and safety. This is an expensive illusion.

It's important to respect where we are as well as where we wish to go.

To do something well, we must first do it badly. By trying something new and doing badly, we widen our options.

Being competitive often leads us to quickly winnow out whatever doesn't seem to be a winning idea. This takes away the time needed to develop new ideas and skills.

The need to be a great artist makes it hard to be an artist.

The need to produce a great work of art makes it hard to produce any art at all.

Focusing on a finished product, for example a beautiful painting, is an idea from a consumer-oriented society. This focus creates artistic blockage. The focus should be on enjoying the process of creating.

Intellectualism runs counter to the creative impulse.

Instead of criticizing our work while we are creating it, we could think, "This is pretty good. I'll just keep going."

A drawing, sculpture, film script, or other creative piece is

never finished. At a certain point, we stop and go on to the next project. We see the flaws after we wrap it up, but an important part of creativity is letting go.

The part of us that creates best is not a driven, disciplined automaton functioning from willpower with pride and self-will.

Creating art is supposed to be fun. To create, it's better to draw from enthusiasm than from discipline, from joy than from duty.

It's a **paradox of creative recovery** that we must get serious about taking ourselves lightly. **We must work at learning to play.**

Creative life is grounded on many small steps and very few large leaps. There is an element of drudgery to persevering through these many small steps.

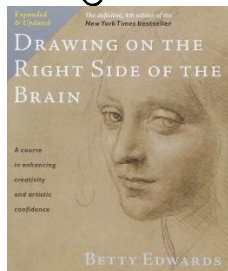
Contemplating the odds against our long-term success is a procrastination tool. Thinking about the odds against us robs us of art-as-process. It puts us at the mercy of imagined powers out there.

Accept that there is abundance. Don't worry that someone else has already - or better - covered it, written it, photographed it, et cetera.

The creative process is a process of surrender, not of control.

Procrastination is not laziness. It is fear. It may be the fear of not being good enough, of not finishing, or of failure. **The cure is to be gentle with our innate creative powers.**

Betty Edward's Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain



Betty Edward's *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, *A course in enhancing creativity and artistic confidence* is simply brilliant. It's easy to pick up this book, but more challenging to complete it. I purchased *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, began reading it, and stopped early on. I put the book down at the instruction on how to construct a picture plane, a framed 8" or 10" sheet of plastic or glass. It took me a year to pick the book up again. I've found its instructions and insights invaluable. Using the picture plane to help draw dimension more accurately turned out to be my favorite part.

Here are some highlights that particularly resonated with me.

Our culture strongly values the kind of thinking associated with the left hemisphere of the brain. Left hemisphere thinking is logical, rational, verbal, analytic, symbolic, abstract, temporal, literal, and lineal. The thinking associated with the right hemisphere of the brain is visual, spatial, and intuitive. It sees whole things at once in reality and in all their complexity. It does not require a basis of facts or reason. Although we are often rewarded for left-mode thinking, drawing is more a function of the right hemisphere. Many of Edwards' exercises are intended to help students access right hemisphere thinking.

Drawing realistically means drawing what you see. This sounds simple. It is not easy.

There is a cacophony of visual information in the world around us. The left side of our brain creates a system of concepts and symbols during childhood. This shorthand is laid on top of what we see with our eyes. What the drawer sees with her eyes may conflict with verbal conceptual knowledge. We experience a mental crunch when perceptions don't match conceptions. This feels frustrating.

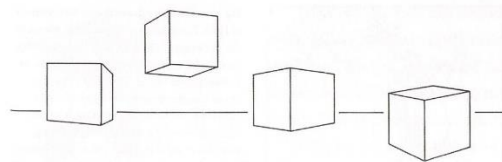


Fig. 5-18. Realistic depiction of a cube requires drawing uncubelike shapes.

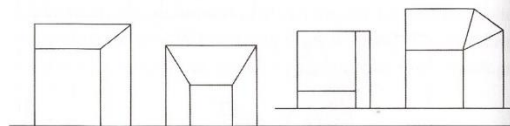


Fig. 5-19. Children's unsuccessful attempts to draw a cube that "looks real."

Children enjoy drawing. They have a natural feel for good composition. Around age 10, they shift to wanting to draw realistically. Many children want to draw a cube, such as a three-dimensional block of wood. The child knows that the cube is square and that it sits flat on a surface, like a table top. A child might start by drawing a straight line parallel to the surface to represent the bottom of the cube. At this point, with only one stroke, it is already too late for a realistic drawing of a cube to take shape. That's because a realistic drawing of a cube is comprised of oddly angled lines. To draw it correctly, the child must suppress the knowledge that the cube is square and draw from pure

visual perception. Stored knowledge, useful in other contexts, prevents the child from seeing the cube as it is. The child wanted to draw a cube that looks real, so they deem the inaccurate drawing a failure. The child becomes frustrated and may decide that they can't draw.

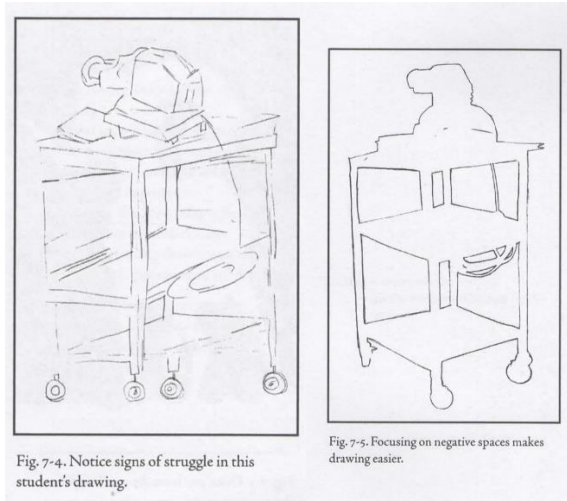


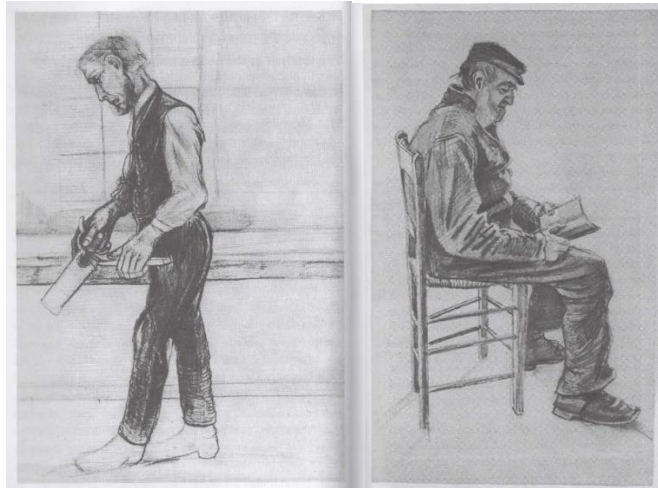
Fig. 7-4. Notice signs of struggle in this student's drawing.

Fig. 7-5. Focusing on negative spaces makes drawing easier.

The first figure above is a drawing a student made of an audio-visual cart. Edwards explains, "In...the first drawing, the student had great difficulty reconciling his stored knowledge of what the objects were 'supposed to look like' with what he actually saw. Notice the signs of mental struggle throughout the drawing, along with signs of surrender to verbal knowledge: the legs of the cart are all the same length, and the same symbol is used for all the wheels, even though they are in different positions." By drawing the negative spaces (shown in second the figure above), the odd shapes being drawn aren't associated with previously stored concepts. The symbols don't override seeing what really is there.

The left side of the brain alters visual sizes depending on whether it perceives what it is looking at as interesting or

important. Learning to draw the human head provides an excellent example. Novices typically make the facial features too large and diminish the top half of the head.



Vincent van Gogh worked as an artist only during the last 10 years of his life, from age 27 until he died at 37. During the first two years of that decade, van Gogh taught himself to draw. He made many of the same mistakes people typically make when drawing, such as over emphasizing the face and under representing the skull. The left image above is van Gogh's 1880 drawing of a carpenter. He struggled with proportions of the head. Two years later, he had overcome this challenge, as shown in his 1882 Old Man Reading drawing.



Edwards asks students to become more aware, "more capable of controlling some of the verbal processes that can distort thinking..." "If drawing goes badly, calm yourself and quiet your mind. End for a time the endless talking to yourself." She concludes that learning to draw never ends. "Draw anything and everything. No subject is too hard or too easy, nothing is unbeautiful."

A rich way to deepen your drawing practice is to teach someone else to draw.

Some Resources I Find Helpful

Betty Edward's [Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain](#)

<http://drawright.com/bettys-books/>

Elizabeth Gilbert's [Big Magic](#) book and [Magic Lessons](#) podcast

<https://www.elizabethgilbert.com/books/big-magic/> and <https://www.elizabethgilbert.com/magic-lessons/>

Danielle Krysa's [Your Inner Critic is a Big Jerk](#) and [The Jealous Curator](#)

podcast <http://www.thejealouscurator.com/blog/books/> and <http://www.thejealouscurator.com>

Elle Luna's [The Crossroads of Should and Must](#)

<https://medium.com/@elleluna/the-crossroads-of-should-and-must-90c75eb7c5b0>

Austin Kleon's [Steal Like an Artist](#) <http://austinkleon.com/steal/>

Julia Cameron's [The Artist's Way](#) <http://juliacameronlive.com/books-by-julia/the-artists-way-a-spiritual-path-to-higher-creativity/>

[Dana Ellyn's](#) Artistic Activism podcast interview on [Tranquility du Jour](#)

danaellyn.com and <http://www.kimberlywilson.com/podcasts/taj359-artistic-activism/>

