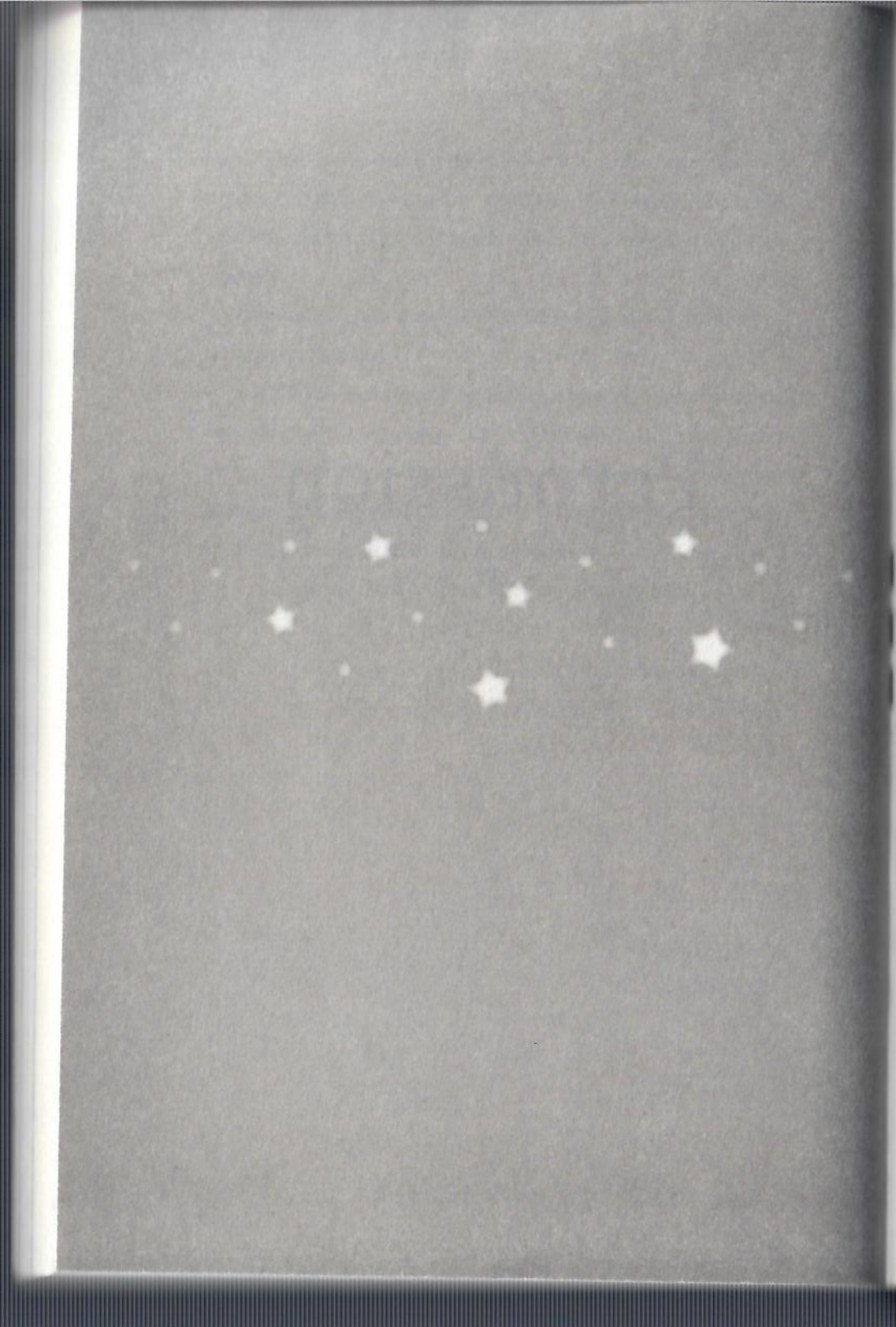
Permission



Remove the Suggestion Box

I didn't grow up in a family of artists.

I come from people who worked more regularly at life, you might say.

My maternal grandfather was a dairy farmer; my paternal grandfather was a furnace salesman. Both my grandmothers were housewives, and so were their mothers, their sisters, their aunts.

As for my parents, my father is an engineer and my mother is a nurse. And although they were the right age for it, my parents were never hippies—not in the least. They were far too conservative for such things. My dad spent the 1960s in college and the Navy; my mom spent those same years in nursing school, working night shifts at the hospital,

and responsibly saving her money. After they were married, my dad got a job at a chemical company, and he worked there for thirty years. Mom worked part-time, became an active member of our local church, served on the school board, volunteered at the library, and visited the elderly and the housebound.

They were responsible people. Taxpayers. Solid. Voted for Reagan. (Twice!)

I learned how to be a rebel from them.

Because—just beyond the reach of their basic good citizenship—my parents did whatever the hell they wanted to do with their lives, and they did it with a rather fabulous sense of insouciance. My father decided that he didn't merely want to be a chemical engineer; he also wanted to be a Christmas-tree farmer, and so in 1973 he went and did that. He moved us out to a farm, cleared some land, planted some seedlings, and commenced with his project. He didn't quit his day job to follow his dream; he just folded his dream into his everyday life. He wanted to raise goats, too, so he acquired some goats. Brought them home in the backseat of our Ford Pinto. Had he ever raised goats? No, but he thought he could figure it out. It was the same thing when he became interested in beekeeping: He just got himself some bees and began. Thirty-five years later, he still has those hives.

When my father grew curious about things, he pursued them. He had solid faith in his own capabilities. And when my father needed something (which was rare, because he basically has the material needs of a hobo), he made it himself, or fixed it himself, or somehow cobbled it together himself—usually without referring to the instructions, and generally without asking the advice of an expert. My dad doesn't hold much respect for instructions or for experts. He is no more impressed by people's degrees than he is by other civilized niceties such as building permits and NO TRESPASSING signs. (For better or for worse, my dad taught me that the best place to pitch a tent will always be the spot marked NO CAMPING.)

My father *really* doesn't like being told what to do. His sense of individualistic defiance is so strong, it's often comical. Back in the Navy, he was once commanded by his captain to make a suggestion box to put in the canteen. Dad dutifully built the box, nailed it to the wall, then wrote the first suggestion and dropped it through the slot. His note read: *I suggest that you remove the suggestion box.*

In many ways he's a weird egg, my dad, and his hyperantiauthoritarian instincts can border at times on the pathological . . . but I always suspected that he was kind of cool, anyway, even back when I was an easily embarrassed child being driven around town in a Ford Pinto filled with

goats. I knew that he was doing his own thing and following his own path, and I intuitively sensed that this made him, by definition, an interesting person. I didn't have a term for it back then, but I can see now that he was practicing something called creative living.

I liked it.

I also took note of it for when it came time to imagine my own life. It's not that I wanted to make any of the same choices my father had made (I am neither a farmer nor a Republican), but his example empowered me to forge my own way through the world however I liked. Also, just like my dad, I don't like people telling me what to do. While I am not at all confrontational, I am deeply stubborn. This stubbornness helps when it comes to the business of creative living.

As for my mother, she's a slightly more civilized version of my dad. Her hair is always neat, and her kitchen is tidy, and her friendly good Midwestern manners are impeccable, but don't underestimate her, because her will is made of titanium and her talents are vast. She's a woman who always believed that she could build, sew, grow, knit, mend, patch, paint, or decoupage anything her family ever needed. She cut our hair. She baked our bread. She grew, harvested, and preserved our vegetables. She made our clothes. She

birthed our baby goats. She slaughtered the chickens, then served them up for dinner. She wallpapered our living room herself, and she refinished our piano (which she had bought for fifty bucks from a local church). She saved us trips to the doctor by patching us up on her own. She smiled sweetly at everyone and always acted like a total cooperator—but then she shaped her own world exactly to her liking while nobody was looking.

I think it was my parents' example of quietly impudent self-assertion that gave me the idea that I could be a writer, or at least that I could go out there and *try*. I never recall my parents expressing any worry whatsoever at my dream of becoming a writer. If they did worry, they kept quiet about it—but honestly, I don't think they were concerned. I think they had faith that I would always be able to take care of myself, because they had taught me to. (Anyhow, the golden rule in my family is this: If you're supporting yourself financially and you're not bothering anyone else, then you're free to do whatever you want with your life.)

Maybe because they didn't worry too much about me, I didn't worry too much about me, either.

It also never occurred to me to go ask an authority figure for permission to become a writer. I'd never seen anybody in my family ask anyone for permission to do *anything*.

They just made stuff.

So that's what I decided to do: I decided to just go make stuff.

Your Permission Slip

Here's what I'm getting at, dear ones:

You do not need anybody's permission to live a creative life.

Maybe you didn't receive this kind of message when you were growing up. Maybe your parents were terrified of risk in any form. Maybe your parents were obsessive-compulsive rule-followers, or maybe they were too busy being melancholic depressives, or addicts, or abusers to ever use their imaginations toward creativity. Maybe they were afraid of what the neighbors would say. Maybe your parents weren't makers in the least. Maybe they were pure consumers. Maybe you grew up in an environment where people just sat around watching TV and waiting for stuff to happen to them.

Forget about it. It doesn't matter.

Look a little further back in your family's history. Look at your grandparents: Odds are pretty good *they* were mak-

ers. No? Not yet? Keep looking back, then. Go back further still. Look at your great-grandparents. Look at your ancestors. Look at the ones who were immigrants, or slaves, or soldiers, or farmers, or sailors, or the original people who watched the ships arrive with the strangers onboard. Go back far enough and you will find people who were not consumers, people who were not sitting around passively waiting for stuff to happen to them. You will find people who spent their lives making things.

This is where you come from.

This is where we all come from.

Human beings have been creative beings for a really long time—long enough and consistently enough that it appears to be a totally natural impulse. To put the story in perspective, consider this fact: The earliest evidence of recognizable human art is forty thousand years old. The earliest evidence of human agriculture, by contrast, is only ten thousand years old. Which means that somewhere in our collective evolutionary story, we decided it was way more important to make attractive, superfluous items than it was to learn how to regularly feed ourselves.

The diversity in our creative expression is fantastic. Some of the most enduring and beloved artwork on earth is unmistakably majestic. Some of it makes you want to drop to your knees and weep. Some of it doesn't, though. Some

acts of artistic expression might stir and excite you, but bore me to death. Some of the art that people have created across the centuries is absolutely sublime, and probably did emerge from a grand sense of seriousness and sacredness, but a lot of it didn't. A lot of it is just folks messing around for their own diversion—making their pottery a little prettier, or building a nicer chair, or drawing penises on walls to pass the time. And that's fine, too.

You want to write a book? Make a song? Direct a movie? Decorate pottery? Learn a dance? Explore a new land? You want to draw a penis on your wall? Do it. Who cares? It's your birthright as a human being, so do it with a cheerful heart. (I mean, take it seriously, sure—but don't take it *seriously*.) Let inspiration lead you wherever it wants to lead you. Keep in mind that for most of history people just made things, and they didn't make such a big freaking deal out of it.

We make things because we *like* making things.

We pursue the interesting and the novel because we *like* the interesting and the novel.

And inspiration works with us, it seems, because inspiration *likes* working us—because human beings are possessed of something special, something extra, something unnecessarily rich, something that the novelist Marilynne Robinson calls "an overabundance that is magical."

That magical overabundance?

That's your inherent creativity, humming and stirring quietly in its deep reserve.

Are you considering becoming a creative person? Too late, you already are one. To even call somebody "a creative person" is almost laughably redundant; creativity is the hallmark of our species. We have the senses for it; we have the curiosity for it; we have the opposable thumbs for it; we have the rhythm for it; we have the language and the excitement and the innate connection to divinity for it.

If you're alive, you're a creative person. You and I and everyone you know are descended from tens of thousands of years of makers. Decorators, tinkerers, storytellers, dancers, explorers, fiddlers, drummers, builders, growers, problem-solvers, and embellishers—these are our common ancestors.

The guardians of high culture will try to convince you that the arts belong only to a chosen few, but they are wrong and they are also annoying. We are *all* the chosen few. We are all makers by design. Even if you grew up watching cartoons in a sugar stupor from dawn to dusk, creativity still lurks within you. Your creativity is way older than you are, way older than any of us. Your very body and your very being are perfectly designed to live in collaboration with inspiration, and inspiration is still trying to find you—the same way it hunted down your ancestors.

All of which is to say: *You do not need a permission slip from the principal's office to live a creative life.*

Or if you do worry that you need a permission slip—THERE, I just gave it to you.

I just wrote it on the back of an old shopping list.

Consider yourself fully accredited.

Now go make something.

Decorate Yourself

I have a neighbor who gets tattoos all the time.

Her name is Eileen. She acquires new tattoos the way I might acquire a new pair of cheap earrings—just for the heck of it, just on a whim. She wakes up some mornings in a funk and announces, "I think I'll go get a new tattoo today." If you ask Eileen what kind of tattoo she's planning on getting, she'll say, "Oh, I dunno. I'll figure it out when I get to the tattoo shop. Or I'll just let the artist surprise me."

Now, this woman is not a teenager with impulse-control issues. She's a grown woman, with adult children, who runs a successful business. She's also very cool, uniquely gorgeous, and one of the most free spirits I've ever met. When

I asked her once how she could allow her body to be marked up so casually with permanent ink, she said, "Oh, but you misunderstand! It's not permanent. It's just temporary."

Confused, I asked, "You mean, all your tattoos are temporary?"

She smiled and said, "No, Liz. My tattoos are permanent; it's just my *body* that's temporary. So is yours. We're only here on earth for a short while, so I decided a long time ago that I wanted to decorate myself as playfully as I can, while I still have time."

I love this so much, I can't even tell you.

Because—like Eileen—I also want to live the most vividly decorated temporary life that I can. I don't just mean physically; I mean emotionally, spiritually, intellectually. I don't want to be afraid of bright colors, or new sounds, or big love, or risky decisions, or strange experiences, or weird endeavors, or sudden changes, or even failure.

Mind you, I'm not going to go out and cover myself with tattoos (simply because that doesn't happen to be my jam), but I *am* going to spend as much time as I can creating delightful things out of my existence, because that's what brings me awake and that's what brings me alive.

I do my decorating with printer ink, not with tattoo ink. But my urge to write comes from exactly the same place as

Eileen's urge to turn her skin into a vivid canvas while she's still here.

It comes from a place of *Hey, why not?*

Because it's all just temporary.

Entitlement

But in order to live this way—free to create, free to explore—you must possess a fierce sense of personal entitlement, which I hope you will learn to cultivate.

I recognize that the word *entitlement* has dreadfully negative connotations, but I'd like to appropriate it here and put it to good use, because you will never be able to create anything interesting out of your life if you don't believe that you're entitled to at least try. Creative entitlement doesn't mean behaving like a princess, or acting as though the world owes you anything whatsoever. No, creative entitlement simply means believing that *you are allowed to be here*, and that—merely by being here—you are allowed to have a voice and a vision of your own.

The poet David Whyte calls this sense of creative entitlement "the arrogance of belonging," and claims that it is an absolutely vital privilege to cultivate if you wish to

interact more vividly with life. Without this arrogance of belonging, you will never be able to take any creative risks whatsoever. Without it, you will never push yourself out of the suffocating insulation of personal safety and into the frontiers of the beautiful and the unexpected.

The arrogance of belonging is not about egotism or self-absorption. In a strange way, it's the opposite; it is a divine force that will actually *take you out of yourself* and allow you to engage more fully with life. Because often what keeps you from creative living *is* your self-absorption (your self-doubt, your self-disgust, your self-judgment, your crushing sense of self-protection). The arrogance of belonging pulls you out of the darkest depths of self-hatred—not by saying "I am the greatest!" but merely by saying "I am here!"

I believe that this good kind of arrogance—this simple entitlement to exist, and therefore to express yourself—is the only weapon with which to combat the nasty dialogue that may automatically arise within your head whenever you get an artistic impulse. You know the nasty dialogue I mean, right? I'm talking about the nasty dialogue that goes like this: "Who the hell do you think you are, trying to be creative? You suck, you're stupid, you have no talent, and you serve no purpose. Get back in your hole."

To which you may have spent a lifetime obediently

responding, "You're right. I do suck and I am stupid. Thank you. I'll go back in my hole now."

I would like to see you engaged in a more generative and interesting conversation with yourself than that. For heaven's sake, at least defend yourself!

Defending yourself as a creative person begins by defining yourself. It begins when you declare your intent. Stand up tall and say it aloud, whatever it is:

I'm a writer.
I'm a singer.
I'm an actor.
I'm a gardener.
I'm a dancer.
I'm an inventor.
I'm a photographer.
I'm a chef.
I'm a designer.
I am this, and I am that, and I am also this other thing, too!
I don't yet know exactly what I am, but I'm curious enough to go find out!

Speak it. Let it know you're there. Hell, let *you* know you're there—because this statement of intent is just as

much an announcement to yourself as it is an announcement to the universe or anybody else. Hearing this announcement, your soul will mobilize accordingly. It will mobilize *ecstatically*, in fact, because this is what your soul was born for. (Trust me, your soul has been waiting for you to wake up to your own existence for years.)

But you must be the one to start that conversation, and then you must feel entitled to stay in that conversation.

This proclamation of intent and entitlement is not something you can do just once and then expect miracles; it's something you must do daily, forever. I've had to keep defining and defending myself as a writer every single day of my adult life—constantly reminding and re-reminding my soul and the cosmos that I'm very serious about the business of creative living, and that I will never stop creating, no matter what the outcome, and no matter how deep my anxieties and insecurities may be.

Over time, I've found the right tone of voice for these assertions, too. It's best to be insistent, but affable. Repeat yourself, but don't get shrill. Speak to your darkest and most negative interior voices the way a hostage negotiator speaks to a violent psychopath: calmly, but firmly. Most of all, never back down. You cannot afford to back down. The life you are negotiating to save, after all, is your own.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" your darkest interior voices will demand.

"It's funny you should ask," you can reply. "I'll tell you who I am: I am a child of God, just like anyone else. I am a constituent of this universe. I have invisible spirit benefactors who believe in me, and who labor alongside me. The fact that I am here at all is evidence that I have the right to be here. I have a right to my own voice and a right to my own vision. I have a right to collaborate with creativity, because I myself am a product and a consequence of Creation. I'm on a mission of artistic liberation, *so let the girl go.*"

See?

Now you're the one doing the talking.

Originality vs. Authenticity

Maybe you fear that you are not original enough.

Maybe that's the problem—you're worried that your ideas are commonplace and pedestrian, and therefore unworthy of creation.

Aspiring writers will often tell me, "I have an idea, but I'm afraid it's already been done."

Well, yes, it probably has already been done. Most things have already been done—but they have not yet been done by *you.*

By the time Shakespeare was finished with his run on life, he'd pretty much covered every story line there is, but that hasn't stopped nearly five centuries of writers from exploring the same story lines all over again. (And remember, many of those stories were already clichés long before even Shakespeare got his hands on them.) When Picasso saw the ancient cave paintings at Lascaux, he reportedly said, "We have learned nothing in twelve thousand years"—which is probably true, but so what?

So what if we repeat the same themes? So what if we circle around the same ideas, again and again, generation after generation? So what if every new generation feels the same urges and asks the same questions that humans have been feeling and asking for years? We're all related, after all, so there's going to be some repetition of creative instinct. Everything reminds us of something. But once you put your own expression and passion behind an idea, that idea becomes *yours.*

Anyhow, the older I get, the less impressed I become

with originality. These days, I'm far more moved by authenticity. Attempts at originality can often feel forced and precious, but authenticity has quiet resonance that never fails to stir me.

Just say what you want to say, then, and say it with all your heart.

Share whatever you are driven to share.

If it's authentic enough, believe me—it will *feel* original.

Motives

Oh, and here's another thing: You are not required to save the world with your creativity.

Your art not only doesn't have to be original, in other words; it also doesn't have to be *important.*

For example: Whenever anybody tells me they want to write a book in order to help other people, I always think, *Oh, please don't.*

Please don't try to help me.

I mean, it is very kind of you to want to help people, but please don't make it your sole creative motive, because we will feel the weight of your heavy intention, and it will put a strain upon our souls. (It reminds me of this wonderful

adage from the British columnist Katharine Whitehorn: "You can recognize the people who live for others by the haunted look on the faces of the others.") I would so much rather that you wrote a book in order to entertain yourself than to help me. Or if your subject matter is darker and more serious, I would prefer that you made your art in order to save yourself, or to relieve yourself of some great psychic burden, rather than to save or relieve *us.*

I once wrote a book in order to save myself. I wrote a travel memoir in order to make sense of my own journey and my own emotional confusion. All I was trying to do with that book was figure myself out. In the process, though, I wrote a story that apparently helped a lot of other people figure themselves out—but that was never my intention. If I'd sat down to write *Eat Pray Love* with the sole aim of helping others, I would've produced an entirely different book. I might have even produced a book that was insufferably unreadable. (Okay, okay . . . Admittedly a lot of critics found *Eat Pray Love* insufferably unreadable as it was—but that's not my point: My point is that I wrote that book for my own purposes, and maybe that's why it felt genuine, and ultimately even helpful, to many readers.)

Consider this very book, for example, which you are right now holding in your hands. *Big Magic* is obviously a self-help guide, right? But with all due respect and affection,

I did not write this book for you; I wrote it for *me*. I wrote this book for my own pleasure, because I truly enjoy thinking about the subject of creativity. It's enjoyable and useful for me to meditate on this topic. If what I've written here ends up helping you, that's great, and I will be glad. That would be a wonderful side effect. But at the end of the day, I do what I do because I like doing it.

I have a friend who's a nun who has spent her entire life working to help the homeless of Philadelphia. She is something close to a living saint. She is a tireless advocate for the poor and the suffering and the lost and the abandoned. And do you know why her charitable outreach is so effective? *Because she likes doing it.* Because it's enjoyable for her. Otherwise it wouldn't work. Otherwise, it would just be hard duty and grim martyrdom. But Sister Mary Scullion is no martyr. She's a cheerful soul who's having a wonderful time living out the existence that best suits her nature and most brings her to life. It just so happens that she takes care of a lot of other people in the process—but everyone can sense her genuine enjoyment behind the mission, which is ultimately why her presence is so healing.

It's okay if your work is fun for you, is what I'm saying. It's also okay if your work is healing for you, or fascinating for you, or redemptive for you, or if it's maybe just a hobby

that keeps you from going crazy. It's even okay if your work is totally frivolous. That's allowed. It's all allowed.

Your own reasons to create are reason enough. Merely by pursuing what you love, you may inadvertently end up helping us plenty. ("There is no love which does not become help," taught the theologian Paul Tillich.) Do whatever brings you to life, then. Follow your own fascinations, obsessions, and compulsions. Trust them. Create whatever causes a revolution in your heart.

The rest of it will take care of itself.

Schooling

I never got an advanced degree in writing. I don't have an advanced degree in anything, actually. I graduated from NYU with a bachelor's degree in political science (because you have to major in *something*) and I still feel lucky to have received what I consider to have been an excellent, old-fashioned, broad-minded liberal arts education.

While I always knew that I wanted to be a writer, and while I took a few writing classes as an undergrad, I chose not to seek out a master's of fine arts in creative writing

once I was finished at NYU. I was suspicious of the idea that the best place for me to find my voice would be in a room filled with fifteen other young writers trying to find *their* voices.

Also, I wasn't exactly sure what an advanced degree in creative writing would afford me. Going to an arts school is not like going to dentistry school, for instance, where you can be pretty certain of finding a job in your chosen field once your studies are over. And while I do think it's important for dentists to be officially credentialed by the state (and airline pilots, and lawyers, and manicurists, for that matter), I am not convinced that we need officially credentialed novelists. History seems to agree with me on this point. Twelve North American writers have won the Nobel Prize in Literature since 1901: Not one of them had an MFA. Four of them never even got past high school.

These days, there are plenty of staggeringly expensive schools where you can go to study the arts. Some of them are fabulous; some of them, not so much. If you want to take that path, go for it—but know that it's an exchange, and make certain that this exchange truly benefits you. What the schools get from the exchange is clear: your money. What the students get out of the exchange depends on their devotion to learning, the seriousness of the program, and the quality of the teachers. To be sure, you can

learn discipline in these programs, and style, and perhaps even courage. You may also meet your tribe at art school—those peers who will provide valuable professional connections and support for your ongoing career. You might even be lucky enough to find the mentor of your dreams, in the form of a particularly sensitive and engaged teacher. But I worry that what students of the arts are often seeking in higher education is nothing more than proof of their own legitimacy—proof that they are for real as creative people, because their degree says so.

On one hand, I completely understand this need for validation; it's an insecure pursuit, to attempt to create. But if you're working on your craft every day on your own, with steady discipline and love, then you are *already* for real as a creator, and you don't need to pay anybody to affirm that for you.

If you've already gone out and earned yourself an advanced degree in some creative field or another, no worries! If you're lucky, it made your art better, and at the very least I'm sure it did you no harm. Take whatever lessons you learned at school and use them to improve your craft. Or if you're getting a degree in the arts right now, and you can honestly and easily afford to do so, that's also fine. If your school gave you a free ride, better still. You're fortunate to be there, so use that good fortune to your advantage. Work

hard, make the most of your opportunities, and grow, grow, grow. This can be a beautiful time of focused study and creative expansion. But if you're considering some sort of advanced schooling in the arts and you're not rolling in cash, I'm telling you—*you can live without it.* You can certainly live without the debt, because debt will always be the abattoir of creative dreams.

One of the best painters I know is a teacher at one of the world's most esteemed art schools—but my friend himself does not have an advanced degree. He is a master, yes, but he learned his mastery on his own. He became a great painter because he worked devilishly hard for years to become a great painter. Now he teaches others, at a level that he himself was never taught. Which kind of makes you question the necessity of the whole system. But students flock from all over the world to study at this school, and many of these students (the ones who are not from wealthy families, or who did not get a full ride of scholarships from the university) come out of that program with tens of thousands of dollars of debt. My friend cares immensely about his students, and so watching them fall so deeply into debt (while, paradoxically, they strive to become more like *him*) makes this good man feel sick in the heart, and it makes me feel sick in the heart, too.

When I asked my friend why they do it—why these stu-

dents mortgage their futures so deeply for a few years of creative study—he said, "Well, the truth is, they don't always think it through. Most artists are impulsive people who don't plan very far ahead. Artists, by nature, are gamblers. Gambling is a dangerous habit. But whenever you make art, you're always gambling. You're rolling the dice on the slim odds that your investment of time, energy, and resources now might pay off later in a big way—that somebody might buy your work, and that you might become successful. Many of my students are gambling that their expensive education will be worth it in the long run."

I get this. I've always been creatively impulsive, too. It comes with the territory of curiosity and passion. I take leaps and gambles with my work all the time—or at least I try to. You must be willing to take risks if you want to live a creative existence. But if you're going to gamble, *know that you are gambling.* Never roll the dice without being aware that you are holding a pair of dice in your hands. And make certain that you can actually cover your bets (both emotionally and financially).

My fear is that many people pay through the nose for advanced schooling in the arts without realizing that they're actually gambling, because—on the surface—it can look like they're making a sound investment in their future. After all, isn't school where people go to learn a

profession—and isn't a profession a responsible and respectable thing to acquire? But the arts are not a *profession*, in the manner of regular professions. There is no job security in creativity, and there never will be.

Going into massive debt in order to become a creator, then, can make a stress and a burden out of something that should only ever have been a joy and a release. And after having invested so much in their education, artists who don't immediately find professional success (which is most artists) can feel like failures. Their sense of having failed can interfere with their creative self-confidence—and maybe even stop them from creating at all. Then they're in the terrible position of having to deal not only with a sense of shame and failure, but also with steep monthly bills that will forever remind them of their shame and failure.

Please understand that I am not against higher education by any means; I am merely against crippling indebtedness—particularly for those who wish to live a creative life. And recently (at least here in America) the concept of higher education has become virtually synonymous with crippling indebtedness. Nobody needs debt less than an artist. So try not to fall into that trap. And if you have already fallen into that trap, try to claw your way out of it by any means necessary, as soon as you can. Free yourself so that you can live and create more freely, as you were designed by nature to do.

Be careful with yourself, is what I'm saying.

Be careful about safeguarding your future—but also about safeguarding your sanity.

Try This Instead

Instead of taking out loans to go to a school for the arts, maybe try to push yourself deeper into the world, to explore more bravely. Or go more deeply and bravely inward. Take an honest inventory of the education you *already* have—the years you have lived, the trials you have endured, the skills you have learned along the way.

If you are a young person, open your eyes wide and let the world educate you to the fullest extent. ("Ascend no longer from the textbook!" warned Walt Whitman, and I warn it, too; there are many ways to learn that do not necessarily involve schoolrooms.) And feel free to start sharing your perspective through creativity, even if you're just a kid. If you are young, you see things differently than I do, and I want to know how you see things. We all want to

know. When we look at your work (whatever your work may be), we will want to feel your youth—that fresh sense of your recent arrival here. Be generous with us and let us feel it. After all, for many of us it has been so long since we stood where you now stand.

If you are older, trust that the world has been educating you all along. You already know so much more than you think you know. You are not finished; you are merely *ready*. After a certain age, no matter how you've been spending your time, you have very likely earned a doctorate in living. If you're still here—if you have survived this long—it is because you know things. We need you to reveal to us what you know, what you have learned, what you have seen and felt. If you are older, chances are strong that you may already possess absolutely everything you need to possess in order to live a more creative life—except the confidence to actually do your work. But we need you to do your work.

Whether you are young or old, we need your work in order to enrich and inform our own lives.

So take your insecurities and your fears and hold them upside down by their ankles and shake yourself free of all your cumbersome ideas about what you require (and how much you need to pay) in order to become creatively legitimate. Because I'm telling you that you are *already* creatively legitimate, by nature of your mere existence here among us.

Your Teachers

Do you want to study under the great teachers? Is that it?

Well, you can find them anywhere. They live on the shelves of your library; they live on the walls of museums; they live in recordings made decades ago. Your teachers don't even need to be alive to educate you masterfully. No living writer has ever taught me more about plotting and characterization than Charles Dickens has taught me—and needless to say, I never met with him during office hours to discuss it. All I had to do in order to learn from Dickens was to spend years privately studying his novels like they were holy scripture, and then to practice like the devil on my own.

Aspiring writers are lucky in a way, because writing is such a private (and cheap) affair and always has been. With other creative pursuits, admittedly it's trickier and can be far more costly. Strict, supervised training can be essential if you want to be, for instance, a professional opera singer, or a classical cellist. For centuries, people have studied at music conservatories, or dance or art academies. Many marvelous creators have emerged from such schools over time. Then again, many other marvelous creators did not.

And many talented people acquired all that magnificent education, but never put it into practice.

Most of all, there is this truth: No matter how great your teachers may be, and no matter how esteemed your academy's reputation, eventually you will have to do the work by yourself. Eventually, the teachers won't be there anymore. The walls of the school will fall away, and you'll be on your own. The hours that you will then put into practice, study, auditions, and creation will be entirely up to you.

The sooner and more passionately you get married to this idea—*that it is ultimately entirely up to you*—the better off you'll be.

Pigeonholing

Somebody said to me the other day, "You claim that we can all be creative, but aren't there huge differences between people's innate talents and abilities? Sure, we can all make some kind of art, but only a few of us can be *great*, right?"

I don't know.

Honestly, you guys, I don't even really care.

I cannot even be bothered to think about the difference between high art and low art. I will fall asleep with my face in my dinner plate if someone starts discoursing to me about the academic distinction between true mastery and mere craft. I certainly don't ever want to confidently announce that this person is destined to become an important artist, while that person should give it up.

How do I know? How does anyone know? It's all so wildly subjective, and, anyhow, life has surprised me too many times in this realm. On one hand, I've known brilliant people who created absolutely nothing from their talents. On the other hand, there are people whom I once arrogantly dismissed who later staggered me with the gravity and beauty of their work. It has all humbled me far beyond the ability to judge anyone's potential, or to rule anybody out.

I beg you not to worry about such definitions and distinctions, then, okay? It will only weigh you down and trouble your mind, and we need you to stay as light and unburdened as possible in order to keep you creating. Whether you think you're brilliant or you think you're a loser, just make whatever you need to make and toss it out there. Let other people pigeonhole you however they need to. And pigeonhole you they shall, because that's what peo-

ple like to do. Actually, pigeonholing is something people *need* to do in order to feel that they have set the chaos of existence into some kind of reassuring order.

Thus, people will stick you into all sorts of boxes. They'll call you a genius, or a fraud, or an amateur, or a pretender, or a wannabe, or a has-been, or a hobbyist, or an also-ran, or a rising star, or a master of reinvention. They may say flattering things about you, or they may say dismissive things about you. They may call you a mere genre novelist, or a mere children's book illustrator, or a mere commercial photographer, or a mere community theater actor, or a mere home cook, or a mere weekend musician, or a mere crafter, or a mere landscape painter, or a mere whatever.

It doesn't matter in the least. Let people have their opinions. More than that—let people be in *love* with their opinions, just as you and I are in love with ours. But never delude yourself into believing that you require someone else's blessing (or even their comprehension) in order to make your own creative work. And always remember that people's judgments about you are none of your business.

Lastly, remember what W. C. Fields had to say on this point: "It ain't what they call you; it's what you answer to."

Actually, don't even bother answering.

Just keep doing your thing.