

Checking the Box

a not-too woo-woo
guide to
unblocking your
creativity
using a
simple checklist

Jonathan E Scarboro



Checking the Box:
a not-too woo-woo guide to unblocking your creativity
using a simple checklist
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I am a therapist and first imagined this zine as a handout for clients struggling to define what they want out of their lives, or, if this is already clear, how to go about doing and being that thing in a sustainable fashion. In the process of making the zine, I realized I wanted to share it in a broader way.

Everything I've written is about what works for *me*. It is not psychotherapy or medical advice, nor is it substantiated through research. Please borrow, steal, or appropriate whatever works for *you* and reject, throw away, or spit out the rest. Namaste.*

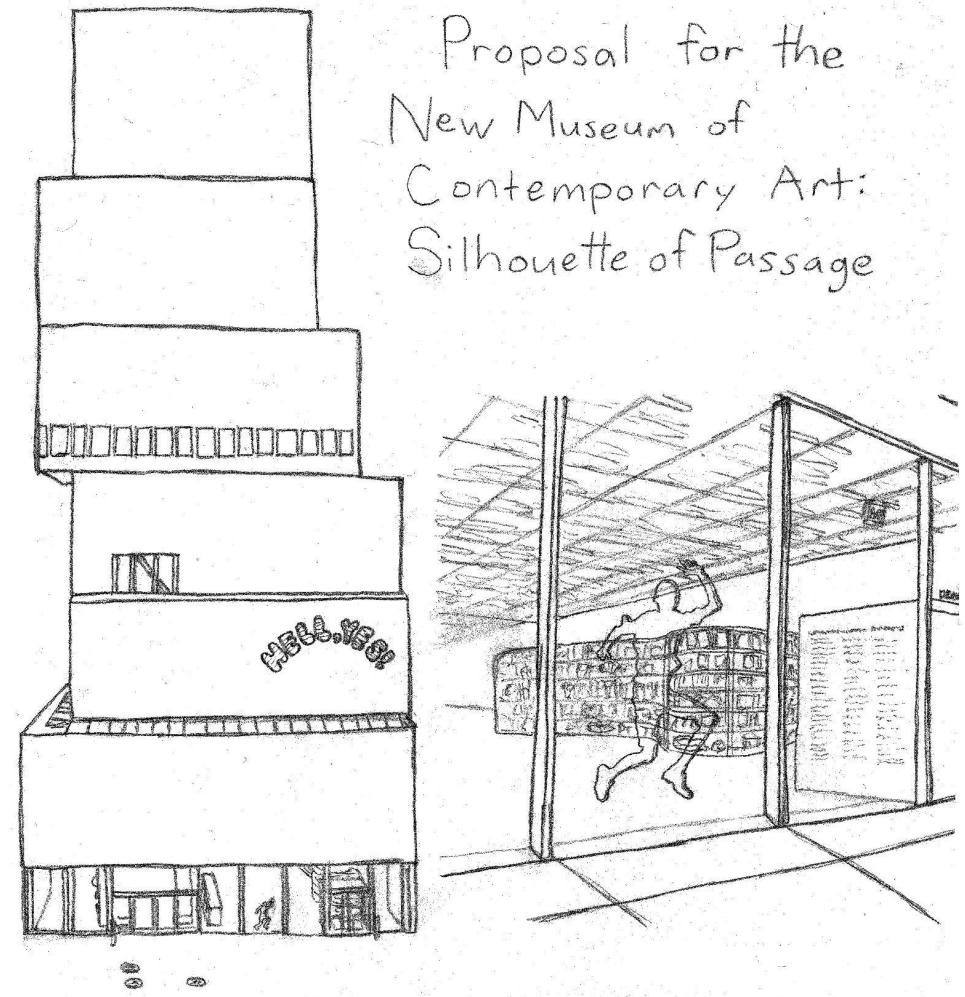
xoxo,
Jonathan, winter 2023-24
*Just kidding ;)

A brief preamble about becoming less of an uptight and insufferable snob

When I was in my early twenties, I wanted desperately to be an Artist. I moved to New York, worked at a hip museum, lived in my friend's painting studio, the whole thing. I had ideas for big sculptures, complex installations, institutional interventions, but few resources to accomplish anything on this scale.

And so I fretted about my lack of output and got bitter as I saw the people with the skill, time, money, and connections rise up. I spent the better part of the next ten years in creative constipation, making almost nothing because my need to prove I *could do* something "big" had outstripped my willingness to *actually do* anything "small."

Art can help us symbolically act out what otherwise might remain unexpressed due to the constraints of our actual lives. This drawing is one of the very last things I made before the start of the long block in my twenties and thirties :/



A life-size silhouette of my body will be cut from the glass of the museum's ground-floor facade.

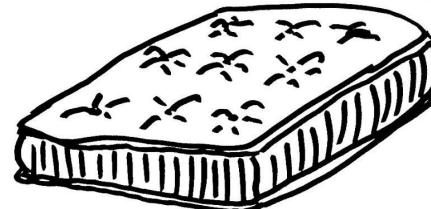
A lot happened to help me move out of my block, but one of the essential things was accepting what I could do with what I had. I had pens and paper. If I let myself, I could draw. Given that I'd barely drawn at all for a decade, these early drawings were mostly crude and derivative (and worse, I had the "good taste" to know it). But I set this little goal for myself to draw something—*anything!*—every day. Or at least, more days of the week than not.

On the days that I was able to let go of the idea that what I made needed to be skillful or clever or interesting ("good," "tasteful"), I noticed that drawing was *fun*. Even if the resulting drawing sucked—and, again, they mostly did—I felt good doing it. And I felt good having done it.

Rather than an *Artist*, I eventually came to identify as *Someone Who Enjoys Drawing*.

This rather clunky new way of framing my creative practice was a huge paradigm shift.

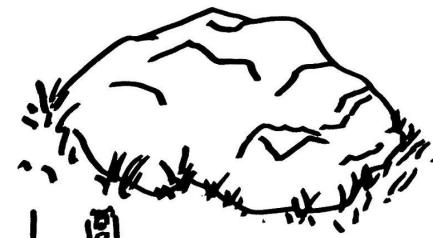
Things I Have Slept On *This Week*



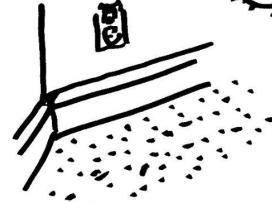
- Mattress; conventional type



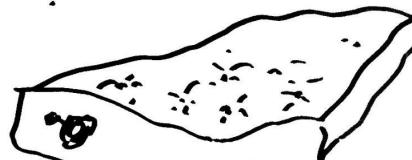
- Mattress; air-type, with hole



- Majestic granite boulder



- Section of carpet by ~~wall~~ wall furthest from suspicious stain



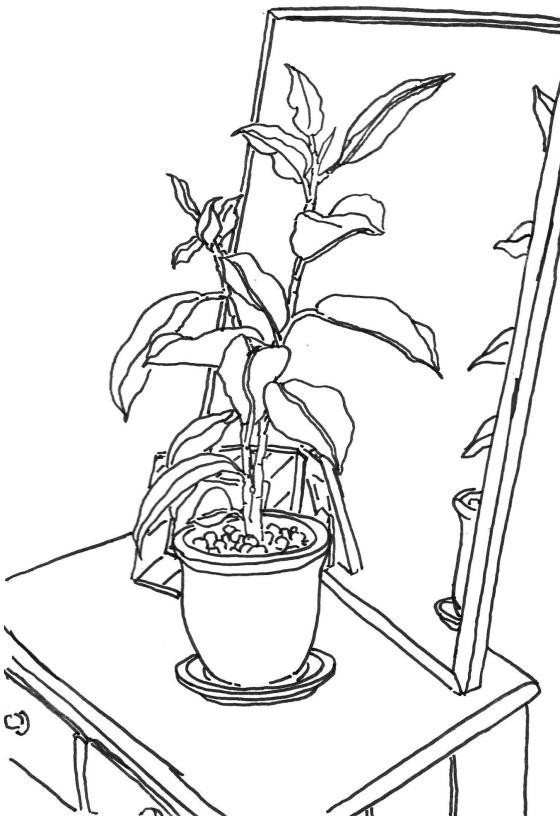
- Mattress; air-type #2, with smaller hole

This is from right when I started drawing again, showing both where I was at skillswise, and some sense of how my life could be then. I loved that time and still love this drawing, but it's nice to see how far I've come on both fronts.

A to-do list for what you care about

Something clicked when I noticed the shift toward enjoyment had taken place, and I started experimenting with other things I'd wanted to do more of but had been putting off or had tried out with too high an expectation.

With the new mindset, I began playing around rather than going too hard and too fast, burning out, or losing interest. Eventually, I realized I needed a way to remind myself of the various things I wanted to do regularly.



I now keep a **to-do list of actions and activities that are important to me** but easy to put off. Keeping the list helps me to prioritize and enjoy these aspects of my life rather than fretting about them.

Throughout the zine, I mostly discuss drawing. I like sharing my drawings, they illustrate and flesh out the text, and beyond that, drawing is the process I've worked with the longest. That

said, these principles apply across the board with mostly any behavior or creative action you're wanting more of in your life. I'll talk more about this as we go along.



This is my actual list as it is in this moment. **This zine is a set of guidelines** for making and using a version of your own list.

The items here are specific to what I am currently working on in my own life, and therefore your list may not look exactly like my list. You are, of course, welcome to copy and try out whatever resonates.

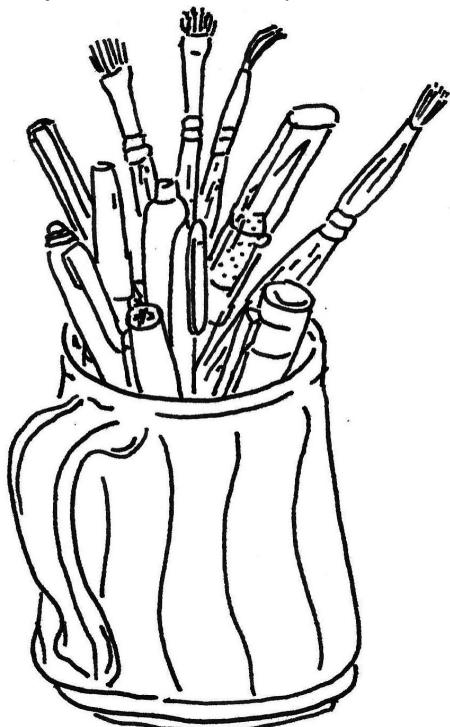
With time, my list has swollen to the 20+ items here. I recommend starting with ten or less to keep it approachable. I'll likely rewrite it soon and lose a few, then experiment with adding new items as they occur to me.

The list is a reminder to do the things you care about over and over again

I think of creativity as a process we move through and sometimes get stuck in. Don't worry about remembering this exactly as it's presented; I'll be sharing examples as we go.

- 1) Getting clear on what you want to do and/or identifying some sense of drive, motivation, or interest from within;
- 2) Identifying what relevant resources such as time, energy, materials, etc. are available to you in that very moment and adjusting expectations accordingly;
- 3) Doing the thing—bringing it out of idealized thought and into the messy, imperfect world (if this is a longer term goal/project, completing one step, however small);
- 3.5) Doing it again.

Rather than "good," "brilliant," or "original," I strive to be **iterative**. By making or doing something regularly and taking some risks now and then, my processes refine over time on their own. Clarity, skill, and style are inevitable byproducts, developing naturally with repeated mild to moderate effort, and without much force or undue stress.



When we purposefully combine the inner and outer aspects of our experience, *bringing together ourselves and our environment in some intentional way*, we are creating something. Feel into what you want*, look to see what there is around you, engage your interest with what is there.

Using the daily checklist encourages us to engage this process again and again, integrating what we learned in the previous tries, refining our skills, knowledge base, and so forth. To be iterative about my point: **we get "better" over time by doing—not by thinking about doing**. More on this as we go.

Just like we must eat and poop and work and sleep each day in order to stay alive, we can also choose to do something we care about each day in order to feel we are actually *living*.



*Difficulty with this kind of self-knowledge varies from person to person. Your relative ability to/style of feeling into yourself is impacted by all sorts of factors, including genetics, family and culture, availability of resources, experience of trauma and/or neglect, and so on.

Tackling this is beyond the scope of this work, but here's a thought: if this is hard at first, experiment with going easy on yourself *and also keeping at it*. Some folks may benefit from seeing a therapist (but of course, I'm biased).

The list is not a scorecard...

I go about my day, the list reminding me to notice my opportunities, me taking them when I'm willing and able, making marks on my list when I complete an item. When I wake up the next morning, I wipe the marks off and start over. I love this part.

I'm not tracking how many marks I got over the week or month. I don't concern myself too much with however many items I did or did not get to throughout the previous day or days; *the list is not there to keep score*.

The clean list also reminds me that each day is just what it is, with its own attendant burdens, responsibilities, and opportunities—different than those of the previous day and different than tomorrow's.

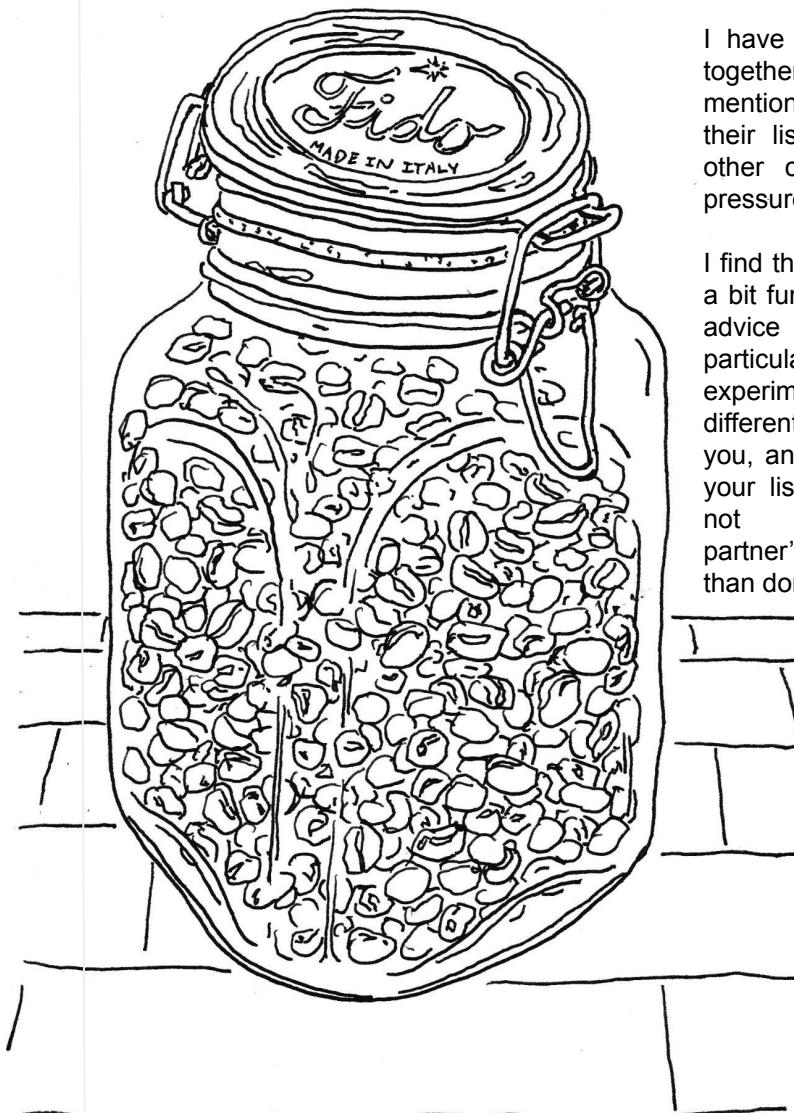
Did I draw yesterday? Yes... Great! I will draw again today. No... Okie dokie. I will try to draw today. It didn't happen? So it goes. No big deal.

Although self-judgement, comparison, and shame can motivate me in the short term, these thought processes can be extremely damaging in the long term and are rarely worth the tradeoff. **A critical inner monologue was on repeat throughout the long years of my block; rather than moving me through it, the criticism is the very thing that kept me blocked.** Shit!

Your results may vary, but I found that the key to passing through my particular block, rather than a militant work ethic, was easygoing self-compassion combined with a kind of *play ethic*. We'll get into what this means later.

The thought just occurred to me that it would feel a bit silly to scold myself for not drinking coffee in the morning since skipping it doesn't *mean anything about me*.

And similarly, it doesn't mean anything about me if I skip drawing now and then, so long as I maintain the habit (assuming it remains relevant and important to me). This frame helps me to remember that *no one is paying attention* but me.



I have two close friends living together in partnership who mentioned they thought having their lists displayed where the other could see might create pressure to compete for marks.

I find the idea relatable and also a bit funny. I have no idea what advice to offer to folks in this particular boat, other than to experiment and see how different set-ups work for each of you, and also to remember that your list is there to serve you, not be your—or your partner's—master. Easier said than done, of course

...but is a reminder you can follow through

Again, I absolutely do not try to check off all the items on my list in a single day. When I first made the list I noticed that I felt a pressure to do that (like, that I'd "win" in some vague way if I marked them all off), hence I added the last item, "Leave one or more items unchecked," which makes it impossible and therefore easier for my mind to let go of the unhelpful goal of marking 'em all. I no longer need the reminder, so I'll probably leave it off my next list.

Similarly, I do not try or necessarily even want to do a particular action or activity every single day. My personal rule of thumb is to try to cross off each item more days out of the week than not, so four out of seven. But I don't track this in any formal way.

Seeing the check marks at the end of the day all tallied up, it's rare that I have a day in which more than half of these are not checked off—although that does happen and that's fine too. This includes work days in which I have a full caseload of clients.

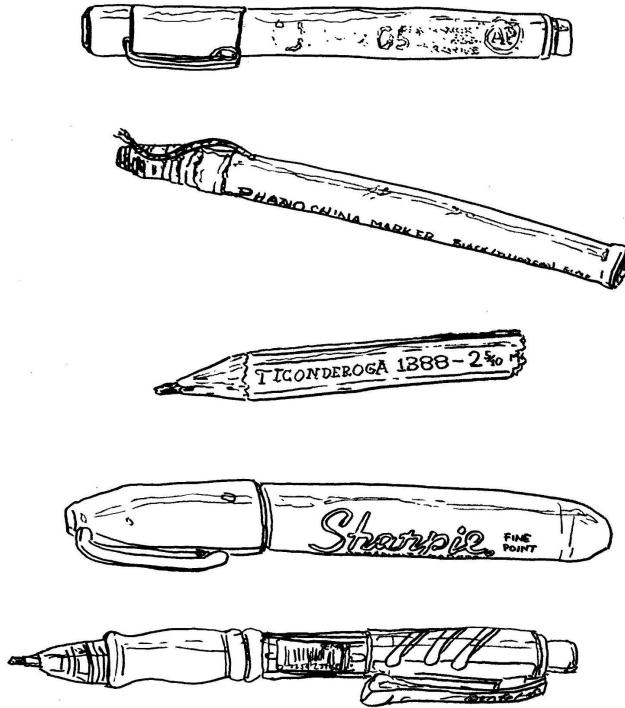
Despite the check marks being entirely devoid of intrinsic value, noticing the regular accrual of them time after time reminds me that I continue to show up for myself each day... which builds my trust in myself and my capacity to follow through on things... which *is* intrinsically valuable.

I typically journal and draw right after breakfast. These are now habitually linked, so it's rare that I skip either, even when I'm traveling and out of my other normal routines. This is at some random apartment in Seattle, at like five-thirty in the morning, before an intensive therapy training.



You probably have what you need to begin

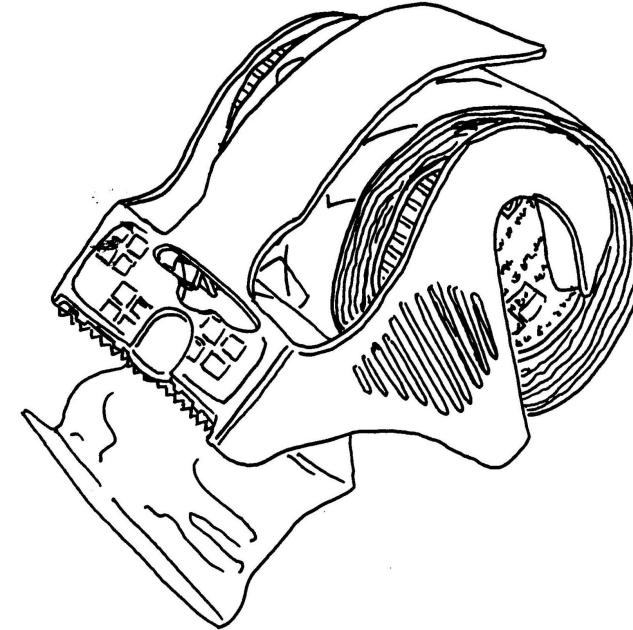
This tool is easy to make so it can be revised and remade as interests, life circumstances, and ability levels change. No stone tablets here, more like DIY whiteboards. This is stuff you either already have in a junk drawer or can acquire cheaply (or clandestinely) from your local WALGREENSRITEAIDCVSMART



-Pencil, pen, or marker Writing by hand engages different parts of your brain/body/self, so I encourage doing this by hand, not on your phone or computer. That said, do what works for you.

-Paper Notebook or printer paper for the draft and something a little sturdier for the finished copy. I like card stock or construction paper—anything that will not easily crumple when handled.

-Packing tape* The clear, non-fabricy kind. This is used to sort of laminate the paper so you can check items off and erase them again each morning. After you've written out your list, you cover the whole page in tape, slightly overlapping the tape edges, and folding over or trimming off any excess. I like to orient the tape vertically 'cause I make tall check marks!



-Grease pencil or dry erase marker* I find the bit of friction in the grease pencil satisfying. These also smudge less than a dry erase marker and don't smell funny. They're also less common to have just hanging around, however.

-Magnets, tape, or push pins* or some other way to mount the list where it will be constantly in your face.

*The items on this page aren't necessary until you have a working draft of your list, so don't worry about having them right away. If you've got a pen and some paper, you can start drafting items whenever. And by whenever, I mean...

Some guidelines for drafting your own list

...like now. My best advice for getting started is to stop reading, stop thinking about whether everything in your life is set up just right (pro tip: it never will be), and get out your pen and paper. You know... now.

Start by writing out whatever items you already have in mind.

Once those are down, try to fill the rest of the page as quickly as possible; this is to help you stay out of “should” thinking and thus to move into a more intuitive state where you might be surprised by what shows up.



Don't think too hard and don't edit along the way, just keep your pen moving, adding one item after another until the lines are filled up. That's something like 25 lines on wide-ruled paper, and 35 on college-ruled.

Keep the pen moving with some gusto, even if it's just to write, “I don't know what else.” Acknowledging, accepting, and *expressing the block in a simple way* can often help it resolve and keep you moving forward.

For those that could benefit from more direction, below are a few parameters. In my experience, a good list item:

- is immediately actionable
- requires minimal resources
- accrues in skill or value over time
- is based on a personal value or interest
- is affirmative (“*do X*,” instead of “*don't Y*”)

That is, I find the most useful list items are written as an *action* you can perform *daily*, within the conditions of your life as it is *right now*, and are also *meaningful to you*.

I recognize some folks may prefer to read all the way through before setting anything down. That's fine, but if I could somehow block you from moving on until you filled an entire page with action-item ideas, I'd absolutely do that. If you're willing to indulge me, take a stab at this before moving on; it'll make the rest of this thing much more useful.

Don't worry that you're somehow committing to everything that shows up. This is simply a brainstorming moment to overcome the inertia of getting started and to have something to work with other than an intimidating blank page. Like a good pie, we will *cook it hot, cut it cold*.

If you get stuck, try to imagine yourself as a kid doing something just for the sake of doing it.

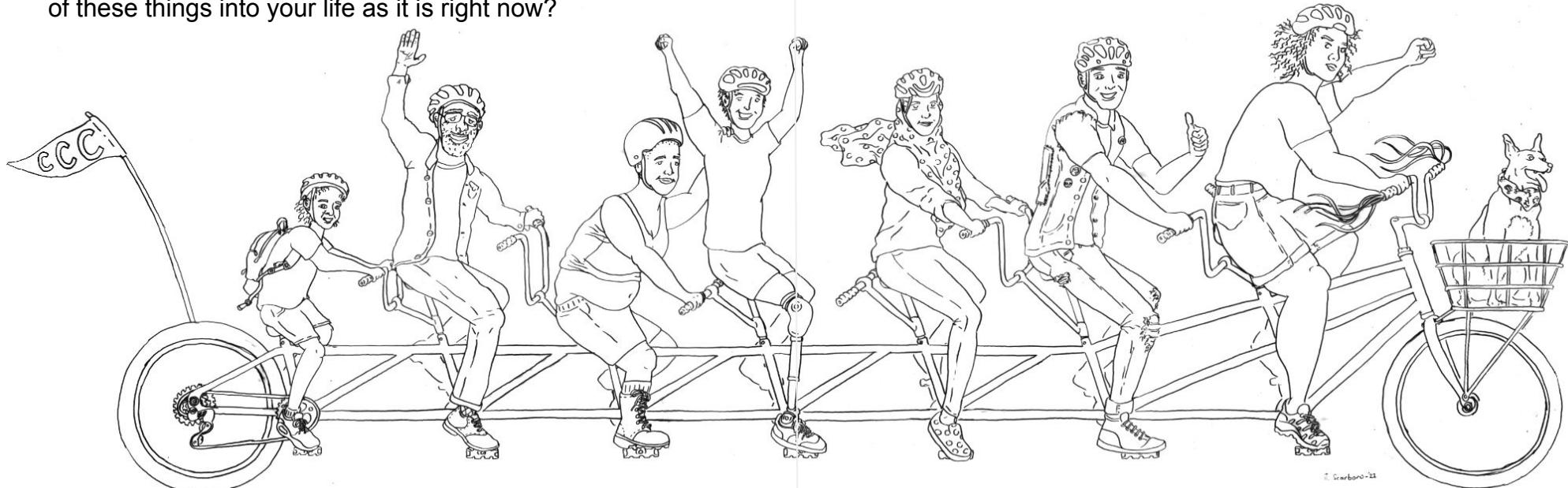
Or you could imagine what you'd like to fill your time with if you never had to work again.

Is there a *small way* you could bring the spirit of any of these things into your life as it is right now?

I have a kooky neighbor who recently said to me,

"The ones who end up good and ready try before they're good and start before they're ready."

This is the vibe we're after.



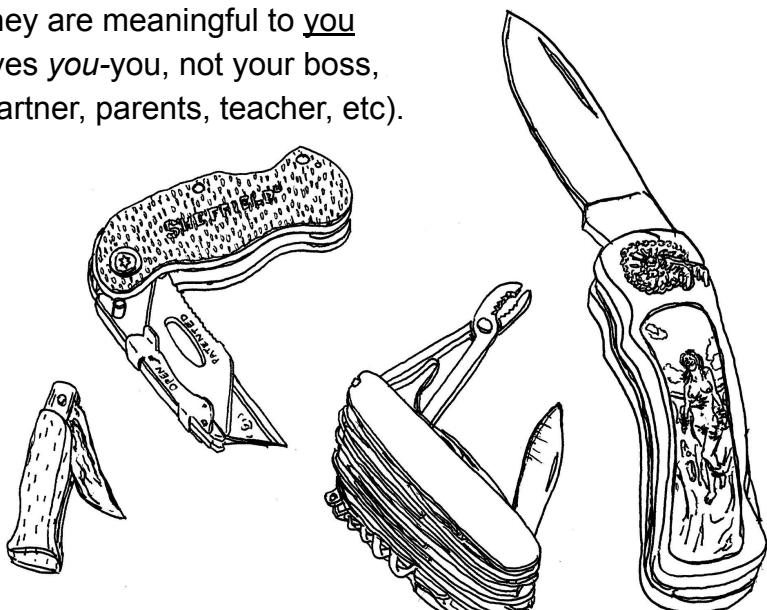
Time for a not-so-humble brag. After I'd been drawing again for several years, a friend of mine asked me to make an illustration for a non-profit she was working for. This drawing existed for a time (in brilliant color thanks to two other amazing artists) as a 60-foot billboard here in Portland.

Trimming and sharpening your list

However you've managed to fill the page, go through and pick the ten items that resonate with you the most and are doable with some measure of consistency. If you want six or nine or eleven, go for it. If you pick 30, however, my guess is that it will feel too bloated and cumbersome to work with.

Now may also be a good time to sharpen your items a bit, making sure

- ✓ they are *actually* actionable (“be funny” is not an action, “tell a joke” is—note the use of a verb!)
- ✓ it is possible to perform them daily (“take five or more minutes to myself” as opposed to “take a vacation”)
- ✓ they fit within the conditions of your life as it is right now (as in *today*, with your existing resources)
- ✓ they are meaningful to you (yes *you*-you, not your boss, partner, parents, teacher, etc.).



For example, my guess is “go jet-skiing” is not likely to make it to the final list, even if it might be cool to do now and then. Why not? Because it requires specific conditions and planning, is expensive, and (I’m guessing here) feels way less exciting the 10th or 100th time than it does the first.



Contrast this to, say, “go running,” which—assuming you’re in a body capable of running—can be done more or less on the fly, is basically free once you have the shoes, and by most accounts gets better the more you do it (again, I’m guessing—personally, I hate running).

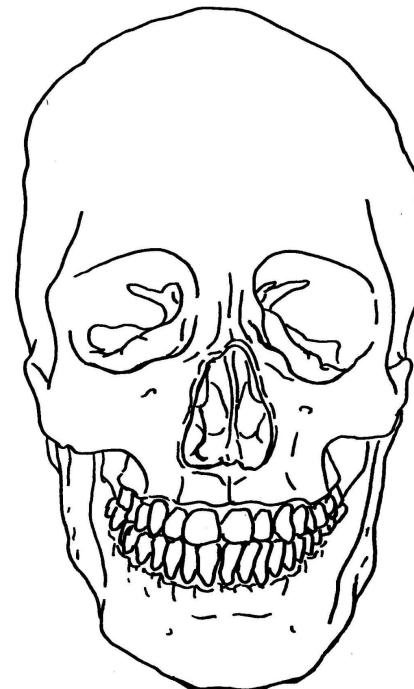
If you’re having a tough time whittling your list down, you might also ask of each item: will doing “X” today matter to me in 5, 10, or 20 years? That’s part of that *meaningful* piece.

Or just try it out as-is and trim/edit as you go.

Don't include must-do's

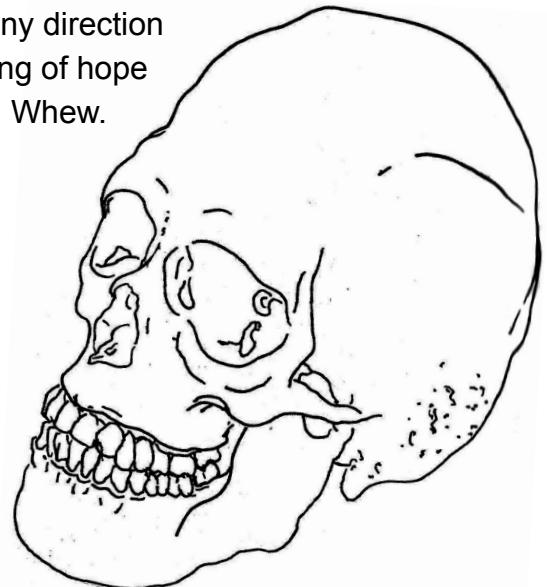
I do not include *must-dos* on my list, such as eating breakfast or walking my dog—they fit my criteria, but I don't benefit from the extra reminder, as my body will tell me I'm hungry and my dog will bug me to take him out. It's nearly impossible for me to forget these and comparatively easy to forget to draw.

If I don't *remember to remember to draw*, then I don't. Too many days of not drawing and I slowly begin to lose touch with that part of myself. If I'm paying attention to my inner experience, I'll eventually recognize something feels like it's off or missing. This feeling is akin to a mild depressive state.



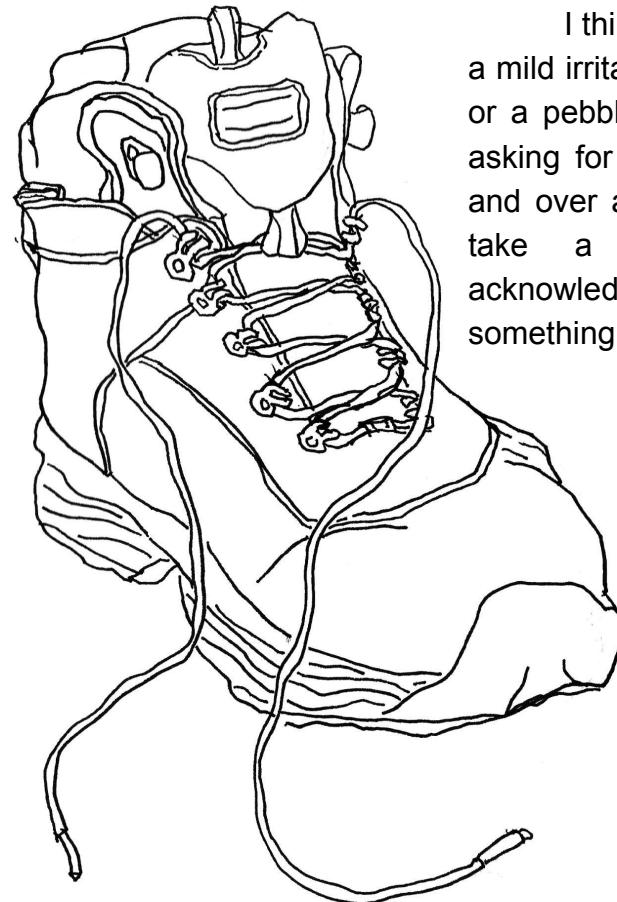
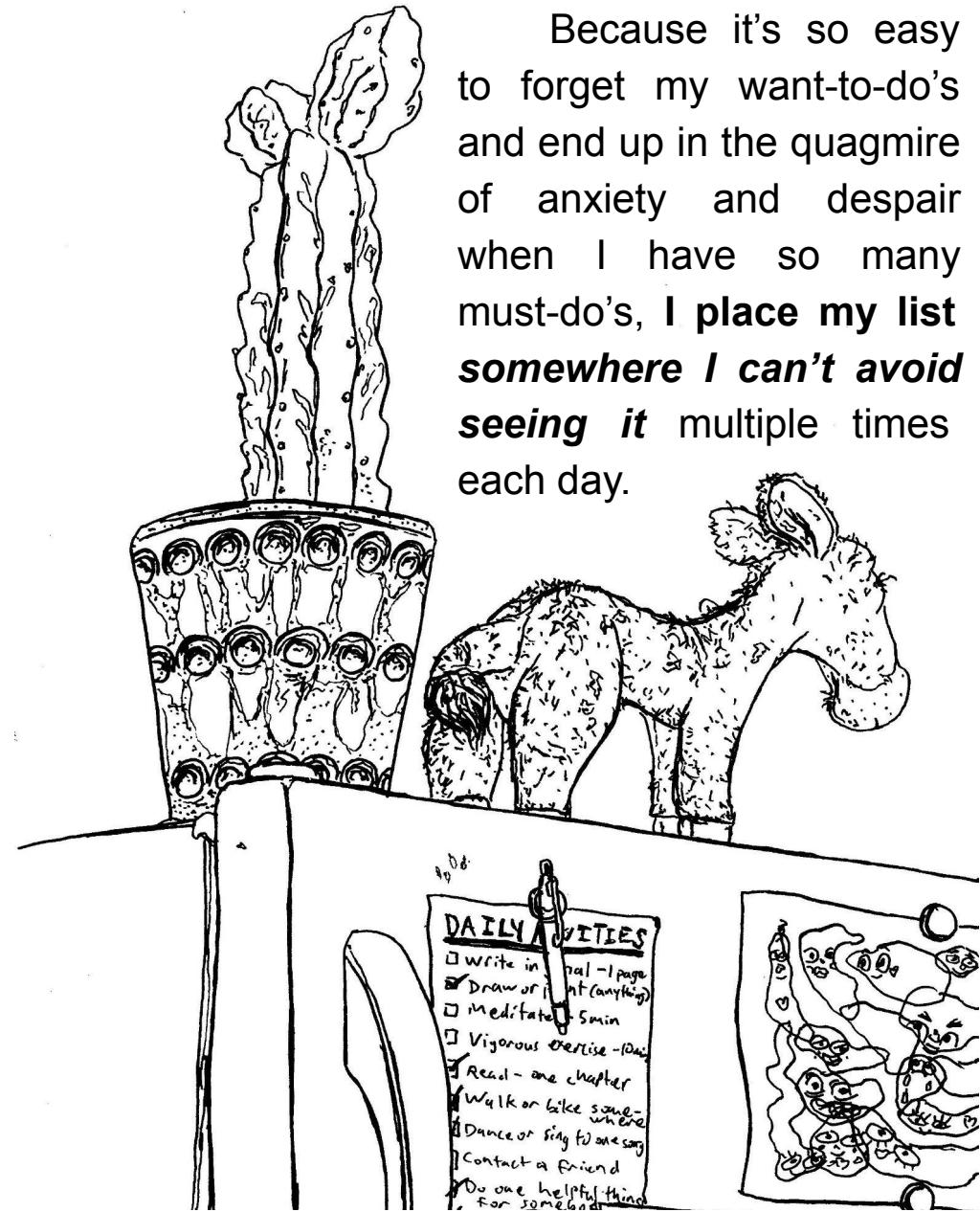
Too much neglecting of myself and my interests in favor of what other people want from me and I find myself in an existential spiral that a friend of mine refers to as *The Muck*.

When I'm in Stuck in The Muck, the meaning of any possible action is set against the backdrop of the seemingly endless pain and suffering of existence, against the inevitability of death and non-existence; everything feels futile and thus movement in any direction requires a great mustering of hope and energy I don't have. Whew.



Put your list somewhere you can't avoid it

Because it's so easy to forget my want-to-do's and end up in the quagmire of anxiety and despair when I have so many must-do's, I place my list **somewhere I can't avoid seeing it** multiple times each day.



I think of my list as a mild irritant, like an itch or a pebble in my shoe, asking for attention over and over again so that I take a moment to acknowledge it and do something.

I gave myself an assignment to draw with my non-dominant hand for a couple of weeks, which checked the boxes for both "draw something" and "shake up my routine." The early attempts could have passed for the handiwork of a second grader, and I feel like this boot here—my best attempt by far—is at least middle-school quality.

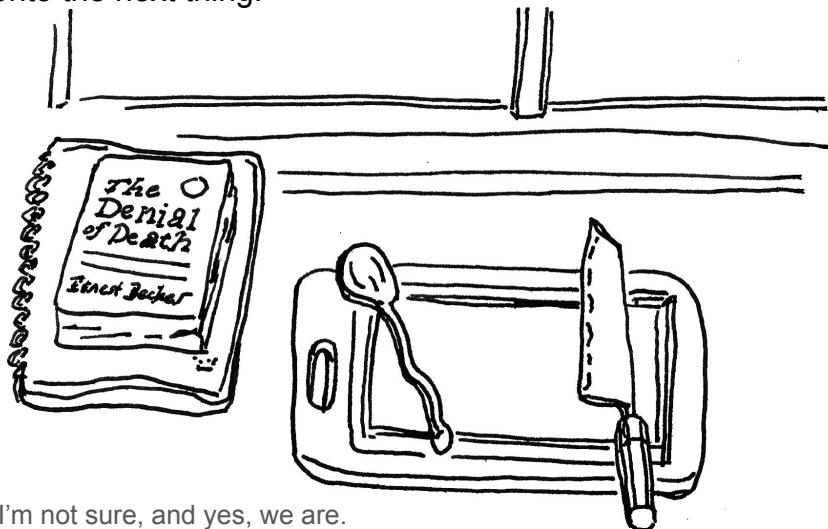
Set low thresholds and try to have fun

Keeping the list in my regular line of sight does not, however, mean pressure to always be “productive,” in part because I set low thresholds for what counts.

Most items can take only a few minutes for me to check off the list. This low threshold for accomplishment helps me overcome my initial resistance to beginning, which is often the hardest part.

For me, initial resistance usually sounds something like, “I don’t have time,” or “I don’t have energy,” or “I will always suck at (thing X)” or maybe, “what’s the fucking point, aren’t we all going to die anyway?!”*

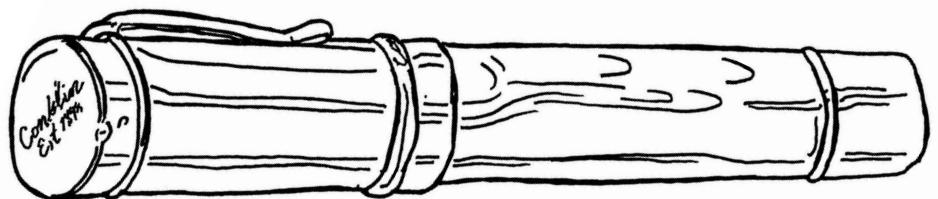
By the way, I say “can take only a few minutes” because often once I’m over the threshold of beginning and actually working on the thing, I tend to relax and enjoy being with the process rather than rushing through and onto the next thing.



*I'm not sure, and yes, we are.

The priority here is consistency and *not* quality.

This method relies on the accumulation of small regular efforts over time rather than occasional bursts of “heroic” effort. One handwritten page checks off my journal box, picking up scraps of litter or an orphaned dog poop at the park constitutes an act of goodwill, and five minutes of intentional silence and non-doing is good-enough meditation. This takes the pressure off of doing things “well” or “right” and frees me up to just be available to what comes up from day to day. It helps me take in the nourishment that is available in that moment, however small, rather than spending my already-limited time and energy *thinking about what is not*.



Engagement in the process—the pleasant feeling of calm attention and discovery I have while making the drawing—is the “outcome” I’m interested in, much more than the drawing itself, although of course the drawing is often interesting and motivating in its own right... like, it’s cool to have something to look at or give away and especially cool to notice how the style and content of the drawings change and develop over time. Really though, the main thing is showing up to do something I like to do just for me. It’s like keeping myself company.

The drawings on these pages were each made in ~ five minutes. They are far from personal favorites, but I am glad I made them! Doing lots of quick-little-whatever doodles like this also makes it way easier for me to sit down for hours when a project demands sustained attention.

Don't wait, action precedes motivation

Common sense would dictate that motivation precedes action and this is how I usually experience the process of moving toward a thing I want to do, have, or accomplish... I notice I'm interested in the thing, I move toward the thing, do the thing. No big deal.

However, one of the biggest ways my personal creative block manifested was *amotivation*, which is a fancy therapist way of saying I didn't feel like doing shit and I wasn't able to muster the gumption even if I did feel like doing shit. See previous discussion of The Muck.

A low-hanging-fruit intervention for amotivation is to invert common sense and experiment with operating under the assumption that *action precedes motivation*.

That is, these days I don't wait for inspiration to strike. I don't wait for a time when I'm excited and have a bunch of energy. I don't wait for a large swath of free time when the house is perfectly quiet and the stars and planets are favorably aligned. I just try doing the thing in my imperfect/shitty state of being and see how it goes. Not, "is the product good?" but rather, "do I feel any different while doing it or after trying it?"

No matter if I make an intricate masterpiece (still trying!) or just a doodle of my mug (got a drawer full of these), if I drew *something*, then I check the box. The mild satisfaction of getting the check is a form of reinforcement—it deepens my neural pathways related to doing the thing, encourages me to associate positively with doing the thing again.

Contrast this to blocking satisfaction for doing anything but the "perfect" drawing, page of meticulous prose, or hour of intense exercise, and it should be easy to see how this need for *greatness* rather than simple *enoughness* would set me up for failure under anything but the most ideal conditions (and often even then!). These days, plain ol' trial and error—not *thinking*—is the way I get to where I'm going.



Yet again: setting low thresholds for checking the box means having some positive reinforcement for making the effort to try, which lends itself toward more sustainably engaging over the long haul. I frame success as making the effort, rather than hitting my target. More on this in the next section.

Anxiety is overthinking about doing; multitasking makes it worse

In my view, anxiety and excitement are intricately linked. In both processes, my body is getting all charged up, preparing for action or reaction.

Anxiety is my body preparing for an action or reaction *that I do not act out* because my power, ability, or willingness to act has been inhibited in some way; that is, for the purposes of this zine anyway, **anxiety is overthinking about doing.*** Not just imagining how something might go, but *reacting to my imagining* to such a degree that my nervous system can't quiet down again.

Bodies produce a mix of excitatory chemicals intended to be used up through action. When I feel I need to act, but am unable to, the chemical cocktail remains, telling me to be ready, alert for opportunities to be exerted (such as potential threats for me to react to), tugging my attention this way and that.

When I switch tasks or change focus, I get a little energy bump because my body believes that I may be finding a relevant outlet for my undischarged energy. But if I keep switching tasks or changing focus without engaging in some kind of relevant action, I remain charged, my muscles tensed and unable to relax. Imagine drinking like four Rockstars and then sitting on a crowded bus for a couple of hours.

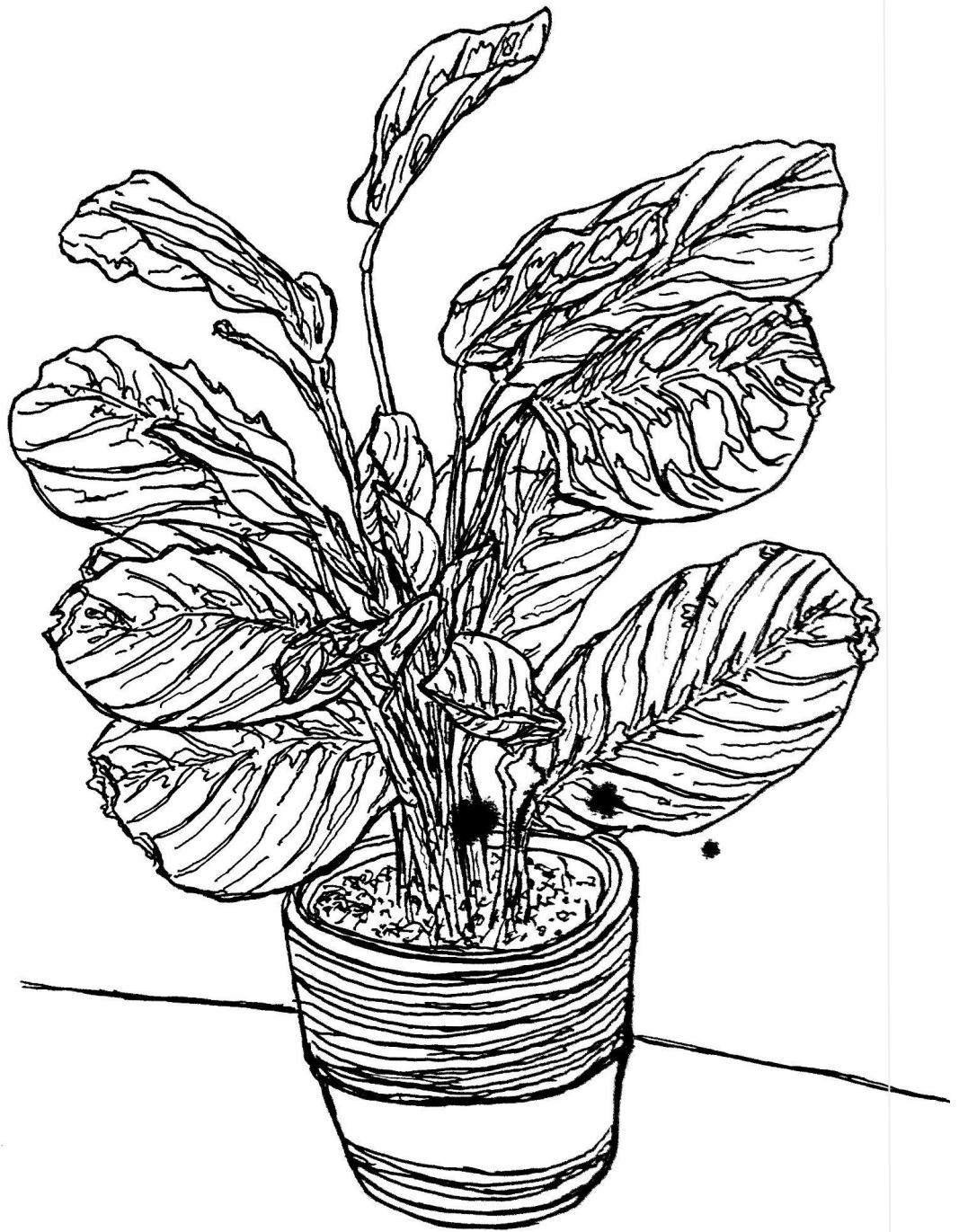
*This definition is limited to our purposes in addressing creative blocks and is inadequate in the context of clinically-relevant levels of anxiety (often the product of significant trauma, chronic threat, and so on). If you're suffering, please consider reaching out to a professional, a local crisis intervention hotline, or dialing 988 in the U.S.

I experience the process of excitement similarly, except that I act the action out (reasonably often anyway), the chemical mix is expended, and therefore does not build to toxic levels that disrupt my functioning. **Excitement is trust or confidence that I am capable of action** that is reasonably satisfying according to the demands of the situation. The discharge of pent up energy is focused and often pleasant in some way. When the chemicals are expended, they can be processed out of my system, allowing me to enter a state of satisfaction, digestion, and rest.

The takeaway: regularly meeting low-key goals each day supports a healthy cycle of action and satisfaction that is *within my control*.



I've just discharged my mix of excitatory chemicals through relevant action by making this ink drawing... time for a nap!



Check out those ink blobs! Bummer!

The list can help lower the stakes

Taking regular action also helps me cope more effectively with my internalized critical voices as they show up. I draw most often with pen, so inevitably there are times when I'm drawing and it's going well ...*when suddenly...* I make a mark that I regret and that makes the drawing not "work" in some way or another. Or maybe I drip water or coffee on the page and the ink smears.

When I was first drawing this would be a catastrophe and I'd beat myself up about it. Oh no! I've fucked something up that COULD HAVE BEEN GOOD! I'M A FAILURE OF A HUMAN BEING! ...and because I would only draw when "inspired" and wasn't making much, these moments felt like huge opportunities gone to waste.

All this pressure made me procrastinate more, which made the stakes feel even higher, and on and on. Some therapists would call this thought and behavior pattern a "maladaptive spiral."

But now that I draw pretty often, it feels easy enough to say "oops" (and by "oops" I mean, "FUCK!") and move on. On an output level, the low pressure makes me more likely to get started instead of putting it off, meaning I draw more and my skill slowly increases with time.

This also allows me to be looser and more playful, my expressive possibilities expanding. Taken together, this means my drawing practice is more consistent, deeper, *and* more pleasant/interesting. Some therapists would call this an "adaptive spiral."

Just to reinforce the idea, let's see how these principles could apply across other domains. I've chosen two non-arty interpersonal actions on my list: "set or hold boundary" and "ask for/receive with grace."



So: The more I practice setting boundaries (limits) with others around small stakes scenarios, the less I freak out when I want to establish or hold one that feels bigger. For example, if I'm wanting to end a phone call I'll say so; if the other person is talking about something important, I'll first communicate that what they are saying is important to me, so that my need to go is less likely to be heard as a lack of concern. Building my skill set in small ways establishes a sturdier foundation for when the stakes feel higher and I am more likely to be freaking out.

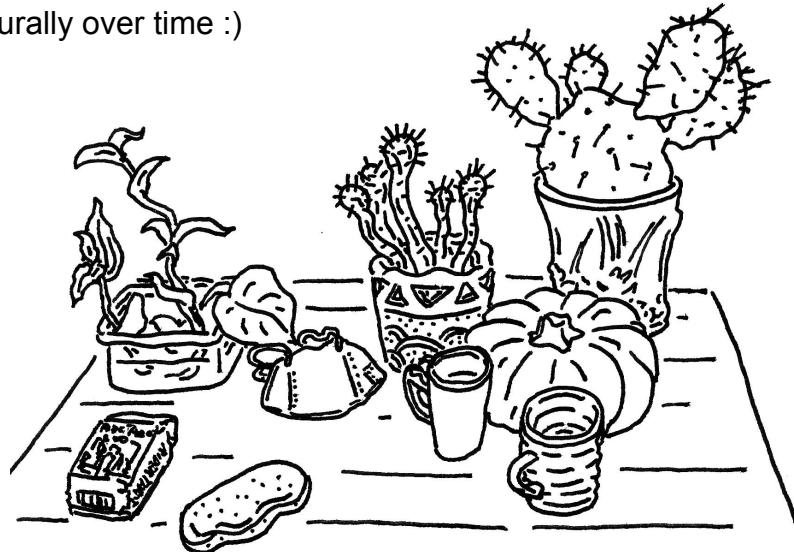
Regular practice also supports my trust that others can hear and respond reasonably to my boundary or limit without disconnecting in extreme anger or disappointment. Now and then that does happen, and having experience navigating these moments helps me remain calm and compassionate toward the other person while keeping firm about protecting myself and meeting my directly-stated need.

Similarly, the more I practice asking for whatever I actually want or need in any given situation, the more skillful I become at asking and the easier it is for me to hear "no." Skillful here means asking simply, asking specifically, and asking directly—and also not overinvesting in the outcome or taking the outcome personally.

With practice, I've learned to take either answer lightly, saying, simply, "thank you," if yes, and "I understand," if no.

Because I'm regularly and deliberately asking, I have experience sometimes getting "yes." I also have more trust in myself that I will try asking again in a new context (different time, person, etc), so that each ask remains low-stakes.

Although the content is different, the *creative process* here is the same as I described earlier: get clear on your want, see what's available, try again and again; skill will develop naturally over time :)



Yes, that is a pack of tarot cards next to the glasses case on the bottom left, but no, I will not tell you that you can "manifest your desires in 30 days" or anything like that. The list is not magic, it's training yourself to notice what you want and to try going for it. The world is full of opportunities, but we have to take a lot of bites to sustain ourselves.

The way we do one thing is the way we do everything

Let's take this idea a step further. There's a saying I picked up somewhere (some book on Zen, or maybe it was actually an old episode of M*A*S*H), which is, "The way we do one thing is the way we do everything."

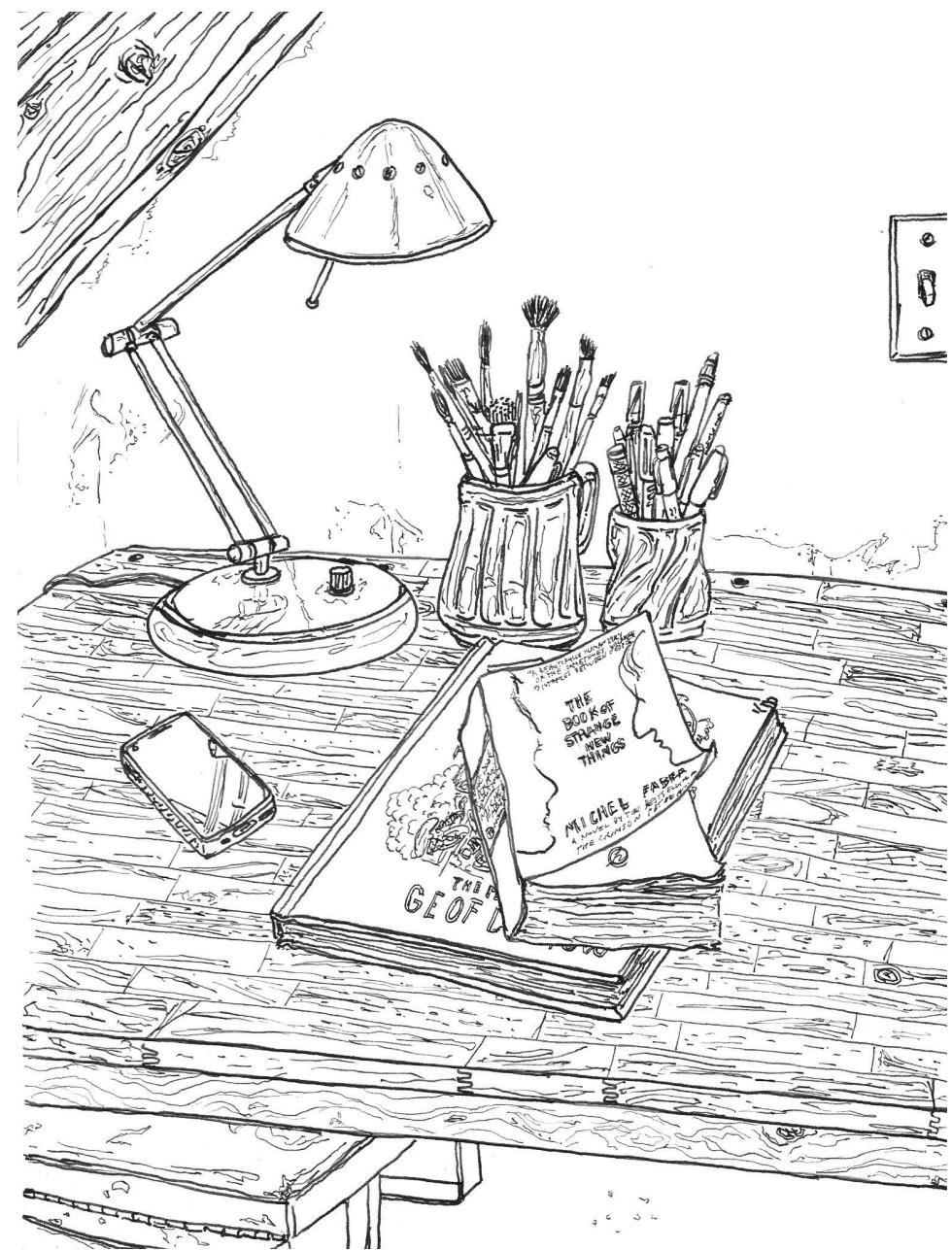
While commenting on a draft of this zine, a friend from my writing group helpfully (and, if I'm honest, somewhat annoyingly) offered an analogous and more evocative quote from Annie Dillard: "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives."^{*}

From this view, as I build skill, discernment, and disinhibition in one area of my life, other areas kind of get pulled along after it.

This happens in both obvious ways (if I value my time drawing, I am less likely to say yes to something that might take that time up) and less obvious ways as we shall see in the next section.

As I build trust in my instincts, act more fluidly, and deliberate less about the outcome in one area of my life, this style of being in the world kind of spreads around to other areas too. I feel more excited (trusting and confident, singular calm focus), which tunes in my senses more intently than if I am anxious (distrusting and wary, with scattered focus or hyper-focused).

The fun, pleasure, or enjoyment I experience through the process can start to *reinforce itself*, setting up one of those sweet adaptive spiral thingies mentioned earlier.



* "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing. A schedule defends from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days. It is a scaffolding on which a worker can stand and labor with both hands at sections of time. A schedule is a mock-up of reason and order—willed, faked, and so brought into being; it is a peace and a haven set into the wreck of time; it is a lifeboat on which you find yourself, decades later, still living." - from *The Writing Life*

The experience I'm describing is both calm and alert, present for and interested in *what is* rather than in *what isn't*.

That is, as my focus moves out of futurecasting (fame! fortune! failure!) and my imagined judgement from others (the best! the worst!), I have more space to become immersed in looking at the actual object in front of me and in the feeling of moving my pen around on the page.

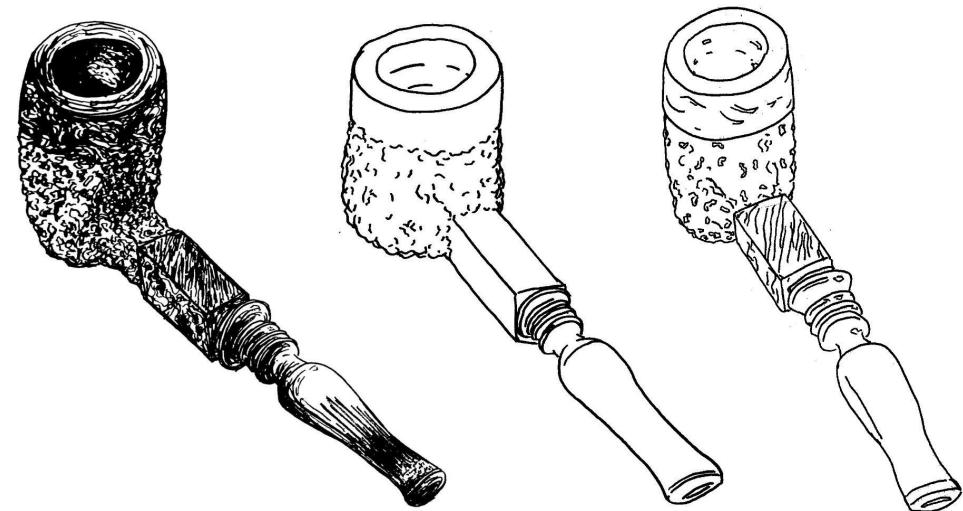
With practice, I'm less caught up in the "what-if" game in my mind and better able to be with what-is instead... as in what is present to my senses. This staying-put enhances my ability to *actually* see what is right in front of me while I draw, rather than shortcircuiting into what I *think* it looks like. Shortcircuiting is a way of allocating our limited attention when we try to hold multiple things in awareness. As you might imagine, we lose a ton of detail when shortcircuiting.

This is the subtle, but existentially crucial distinction between experiencing *a* chair and experiencing *that very* chair. The generic category *chair* is an efficient brainspace-saving shortcut, a kind of assumption that I *already know* what I am looking at, when in fact, if I can slow down and focus, I become aware of many salient aspects of the chair I'd been skipping over: an elegant curve in a seemingly straight leg, variations playing through the grain of the wood or fabric, and so on.

This is a livelier way of relating to whatever or whomever I am encountering in the moment, allowing for a deeper taking-in of my perceptual experience from without as well as a fuller outflow of expression of my feeling-state from within.

As I slowly let go of the idea of progress toward *something else* and instead try to stay with *what is*, the way I do things reflects my experience of that moment more clearly. So really, it is *that* chair as *I* experience it *right now*.

I also don't think I'd access this deeper encounter I'm describing if I'd set up the expectation that I *had* to draw for hours every day—that sounds like work in a way that would shut down the playfulness and movement of intuition which are so key here. We'll talk more about work and play in the next section.



This is the same tobacco pipe drawn maybe a year or so apart under more or less the same conditions each time.

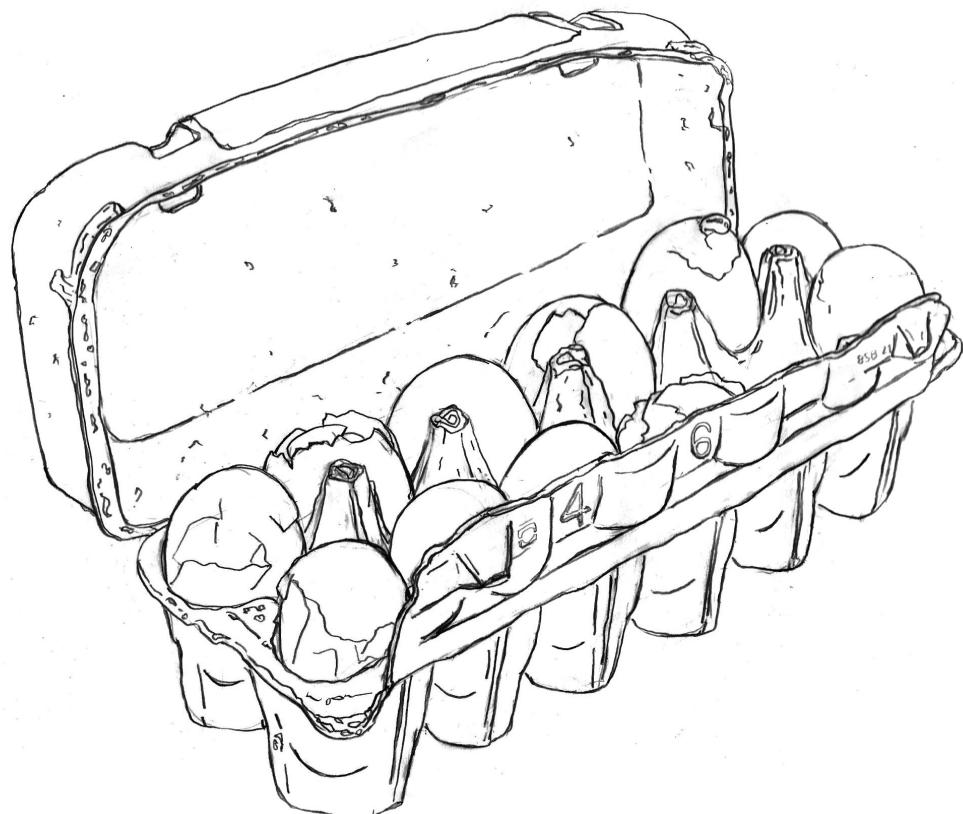
Each drawing was a different experience. I had different amounts of time and energy available, was attentive to different aspects of my perception, in different moods, used a different pen, and so on.

Although the literal content (pen drawing of tobacco pipe) is the same, these process factors all impact the resulting *expressed form*. Again, these stylistic subtleties are developed through iteration, rather than the execution of a preconceived idea.

A quick PSA about creative labor

I have a friend who was a very talented ceramicist. He made these mugs and bowls that were functional, neatly abstract and subtly colored. I have several and have drawn them many times, but they're complex and challenging to capture.

He got so into it that he quit his main source of income to make and sell ceramics full time. He'd been a small business owner, so he had a knack for marketing and soon had a big following on the platforms he used to promote his work. From the outside, things seemed to be going well. After about a year in business, however, he quit.



He later told me something to the effect of, "I got into ceramics because it was fun and something different than what I'd been doing forever. But when I turned it into a business, it was like... how many of these mugs or bowls can I make in a day? I was trying to get faster and make more of whatever sold, rather than taking my time and experimenting with what I liked."

Perhaps I've taken some liberties with the story to make my point. In case it's not clear, my friend had taken his passion project and effectively killed the aspects he was passionate about. This isn't to talk you out of getting paid for your work. This is a cautionary tale about the difference between work and play in a culture that often tries to hijack our creativity by encouraging us to turn it into *productivity*.

On the other side of this, I personally benefit from showing up again and again and just getting to work... except that what I really mean is *getting to play*. Before we move on to talking more about that, here's artist Chuck Close on the value of just getting down to it. I've replaced his word—work—with my word—play.

"All the best ideas come out of the process; they come out of the play itself. Things occur to you. If you're sitting around trying to dream up a great idea, you can sit there a long time before anything happens. But if you just get to play, something will occur to you and something else will occur to you and something else that you reject will push you in another direction. Inspiration is absolutely unnecessary and somehow deceptive. You feel like you need this great idea before you can get down to play, and I find that's almost never the case."

Well said, Chuck!

The list is basically a reminder to play

Since this world so often squeezes out our gleeful play instincts in favor of flatter, ever-more work-oriented lives, let's have a little reminder of what play even *is*. To my mind:

Play is *exciting*—it stimulates our animal, organismic selves in some way. It involves our *bodies* not just our minds;

Play often hinges on the *intentional suppression of what we think we know* in order to make space for what we don't;

Play is not concerned with efficiency—play *unfolds in its own time* and according to its own logic;

Play requires a suspension of judgement. Judgement and criticism take us out of the moment and play happens in real time, *in the moment that it is happening and not later*;

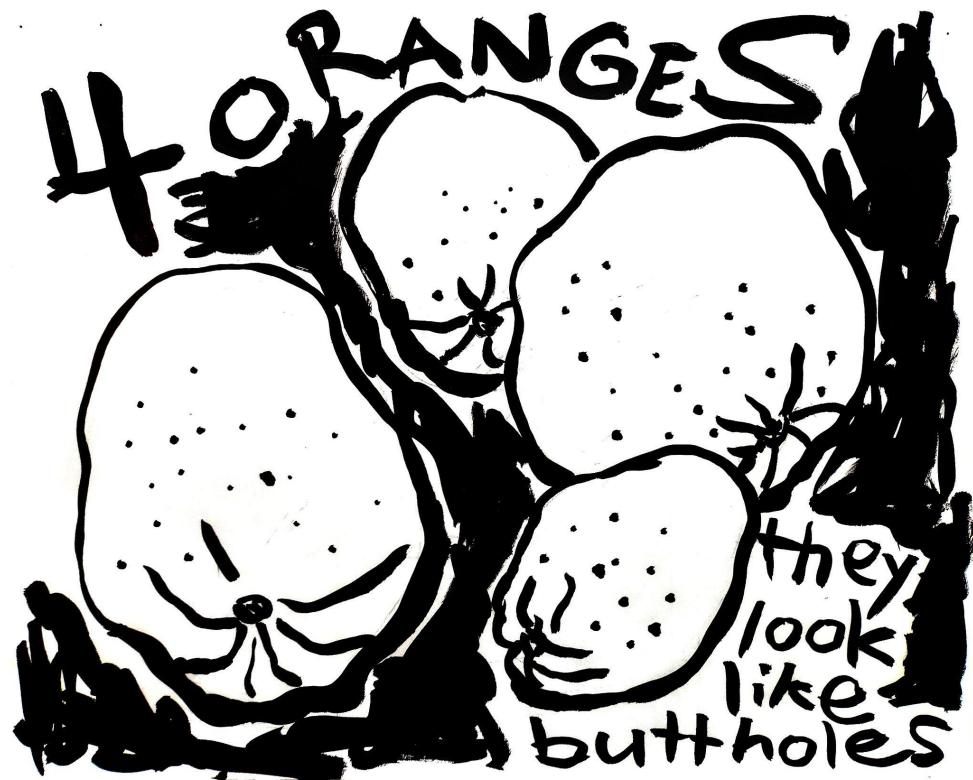
Another way to say this is that *play is not outcome-based*.

So, returning now to a previous example in this new context, if I am *thinking about* “how to get good,” I am probably subjecting myself to someone else’s idea of what “good” means and am thus likely to stiffen up and contort my expressed form into a more familiar or “acceptable” (generic, shortcuted) shape.

In other words, self-consciousness turns play into work.

However, if I allow my pleasure or excitement to lead, the direction is often “better”—meaning more authentic or true to myself, according to my own sense of what I’m into and, more simply, *how I am*. I think of the congruence between my inner experience and the form I express as *style*.

I use my list as a reminder to take a handful of moments in my day to be excited, unknowing, inefficient, present to myself just exactly as I am in that moment. My list reminds me to be playful—to fill the many (often tiny) open gaps in my life with play.



This is from a series of ink drawings of fruits and vegetables made as if they were posters for punk bands. If this had been for something or somebody else, I probably never would have allowed myself to write out what the oranges reminded me of—too stupid!—and yet this “insight,” if we can call it that, is what makes this one stand out as especially delightful to me among the dozen or so others I made.

Mostly because I like telling this story

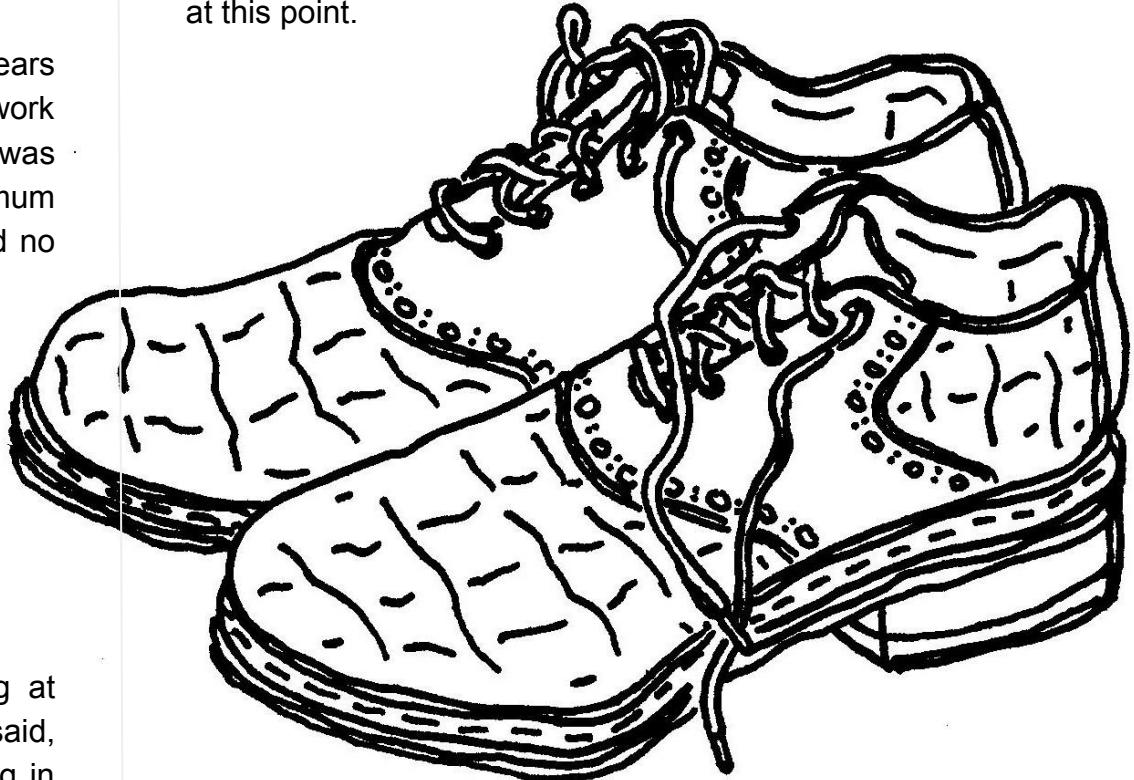
I bought these shoes at a thrift store for \$40 many years ago. They're beautiful, but I needed steel-toed boots at work and never went out to places where formal dress was appropriate. I was making maybe a dollar-fifty over minimum wage, so \$40 was a lot of money to spend on shoes I had no obvious occasion to wear.

Nevertheless I felt drawn to the shoes. The middle part is dark blue with little holes tooled out, and the outer part is gator skin or some other fucked-up thing like that. The sole is real wood and one of the layers is dyed light blue. I stayed there for a long time looking at the shoes, trying them on and walking around, putting them back.

I mentioned my dilemma to someone also looking at shoes, and they thought for a moment, smiled, and said, "Maybe your life will grow into them." There was something in this idea that resonated with me and I ended up buying them. They are now the shoes I wear into work most often, and I've gotten comments from a number of clients about how well they seem to suit me.

I'd had no idea at the time I'd want to become a therapist, but I felt that gut-tug of intuition and followed it, *let it lead me* rather than trying to stay completely "rational."

Opening myself to being surprised (i.e. not needing to be *right* all the damn time) is part of how I moved into more intuitive, meaningful—and stylish!—ways of relating my *self* with my *surroundings*. This way of framing creativity hopefully rings a bell at this point.



The shoes came before the list, but the feeling of intuition I'm talking about learning to follow is basically the same, although I've cultivated more willingness and ability to hear the message when it's subtle or quiet. These days it doesn't take the timely appearance of a wisdom-gushing stranger for me to buy a used pair of shoes. Nor do I need to have a totally clear sense of inspiration or "vision" of my action; a sense of intuitive tug and the willingness to risk trying it out is enough.

When to revise or remove an item?

I should vs. I want

If a month or two goes by and I notice there is an item that has consistently gone unchecked, I do a little informal review in my head:

First, is my threshold set low enough?

If I feel like I don't have time to do the thing, it's likely that I've set the threshold too high. For example, I used to hold myself to a three-page minimum for journaling and unsurprisingly, I skipped it a lot. Now it's just a page and one of my most consistent check marks.

Sometimes I will rewrite the item differently—more generally or more specifically—to see if anything changes.

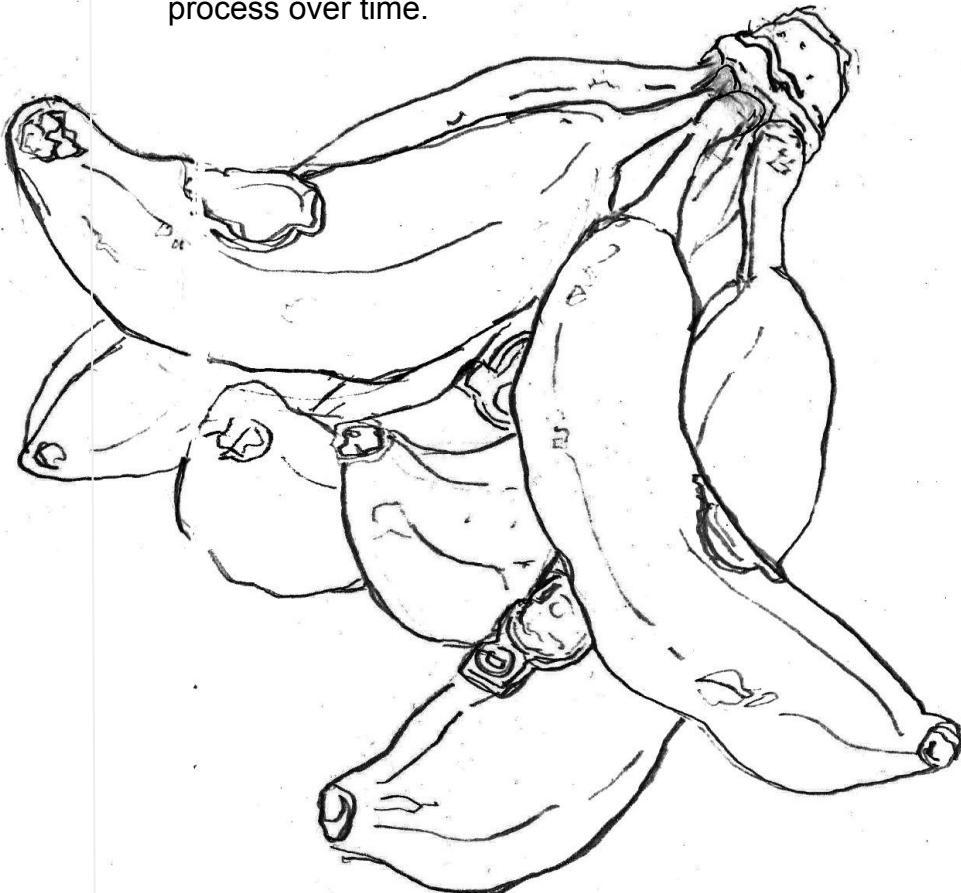
Second, is doing X still important to me?

If no, I simply cross it out or rewrite the list without it; if yes, what has gotten in the way of me doing it? If I find that it is simply circumstantial that the item has gone unchecked, then I leave it on the list and go on my merry way, though with a bit of additional awareness devoted to looking for opportunities to do the thing.

An easy way to check this out is to experiment with replacing instances of "I should" in your thinking with "I want" and see if it holds true for you. So, instead of, "I *should* work on my zine," I try out, "I *want* to work on my zine," in my head and sense into how true that feels. If no feeling becomes apparent, I'll try writing it out by hand and looking at it. You could also append the word *today* or *this week*, etc. to see what impact that has on your sense of feeling around it.

Throughout the first half of my thirties I thought I wanted to write a novel. I had an idea, setting, and characters that deeply interested me. I also felt stuck in the kinds of jobs and personal relationships I'd had since my early twenties and was thoroughly convinced that writing it would be an escape hatch to a more satisfying life. But 90% of the time I *hated* actually writing it. Like, the actual process of sitting and writing felt mostly unpleasant. I did not *want to*, despite the many reasons I "should."

The situation may change in the future, but for now, releasing myself of this expectation has freed up a bunch of time and energy to focus on doing things I actually want to do in which my desire naturally sustains my investment in the process over time.



Pay attention to your resistance

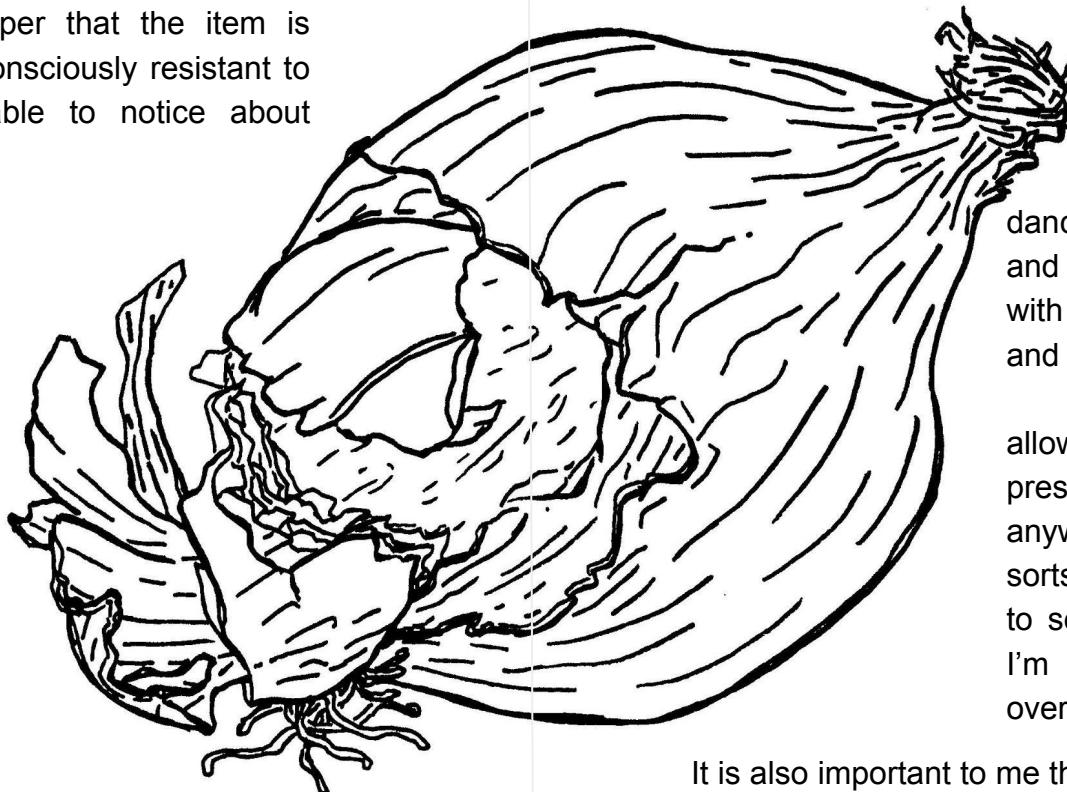
If it holds true that *I want* to do the thing and it's not some version of thresholds or circumstances that's preventing me, then it is a good signal that there may be something deeper that the item is touching on that I may be unconsciously resistant to seeing or that is uncomfortable to notice about myself.

An item that often goes unchecked for me is *dance or sing*. My threshold is set at one full song and I listen to a lot of music with tracks under two minutes, so that's not the problem. I can also rock out with the music up pretty much whenever, so it's not circumstantial that I haven't been checking it off.

And yes, it is still important to me; I have a personal value of being in touch with my body and being expressive, which dancing and singing both are for me.

So what's up?

As I feel into it, what surfaces for me is a bunch of painful and embarrassing experiences from my boyhood and adolescence—a time when I was self-conscious about my voice, ashamed of my body, and the threat of violence loomed over anything remotely associated with femininity or sensitivity.

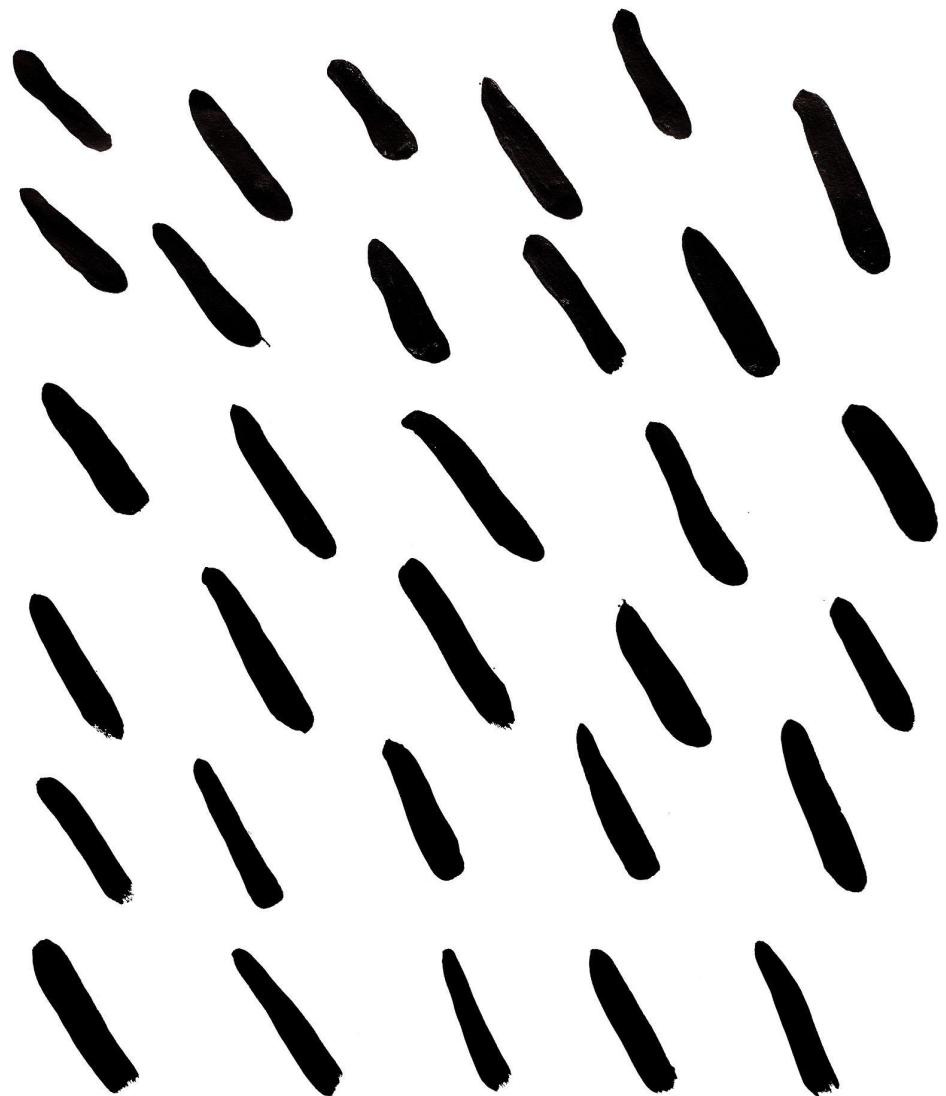


Basically each time I want to dance or sing, this shit comes up and I have to take a moment to be with it and settle before I can let go and enjoy myself.

Acceptance is noticing and allowing the discomfort to be present even as I decide to act anyway. This is a radical act of sorts, as is giving myself the grace to set an item down for the day if I'm feeling too icked-out or overwhelmed by it.

It is also important to me that it stays in my awareness; I *want* to keep working at it. With time, attention, and repetition, this has gotten much much easier, but it's likely that the discomfort will never go away completely. Acknowledging that, along with allowing whatever grief I have about what was lost in the years of being blocked, is part of the process.

If I can't let it go, I try to let it be instead.



Sometimes when I don't know what to draw I'll just make marks on a sheet of paper for a while. This is one of my all time favorite drawings. It's not "of" anything, it's just some repeating diagonal marks in ink. I can't say why exactly, but, looking at it, I feel a happy fizzy feeling in my stomach. The pleasure to effort ratio here is off the charts :)

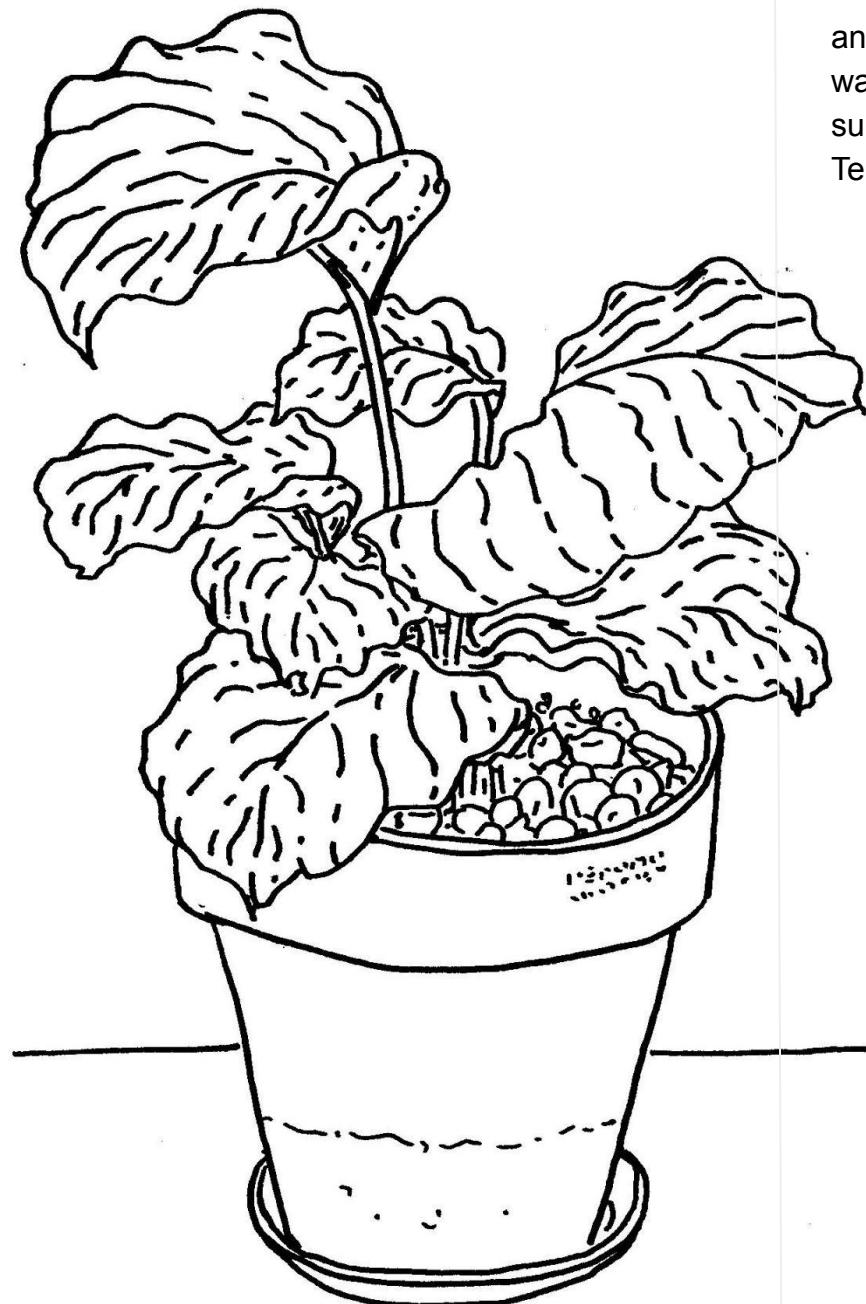
This zine is a product of the list (and can be used to support other long term projects)

I made this zine over the course of about a year or so. The idea started as a one-page handout, which quickly grew to ten pages and kept going. I had no big agenda starting out other than to make something that could be useful to others and to have some fun in the making.

Just like our friend Chuck Close said a few pages back, one thing led to another and all of the really good ideas came out of the process.

I approached the zine just the same as any other daily item on my list. I crossed out one of the items I realized was no longer relevant, scribbled in "ZINE," and got to "work." I worked/played for anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours at a time depending on the day, typing out half-baked ideas, flipping through old sketchbooks, moving things around, revising some text, making my checkmarks. Part of my key to putting in regular effort is responding to my ever-changing resources with a bit of grace (maybe today all I can do is scan two drawings) and not forcing or judging myself when I *really* don't have the time or juice for it.

That couple I mentioned earlier (each concerned about spilling the other's blood in competition for checkmarks) are both using their lists to support writing novels along with some other things they're each playing with individually. They've both set one-page thresholds and it sounds like things are going well and without blood. So far.



To summarize this whole approach with a cutesy analogy, I'm advocating that we treat our creative selves in the way we would care for a neat plant. With a bit of water and sunlight, the plant will generally just do its thing and grow. Tending to it effectively is mostly about consistency.

Using the list, we approach creativity with the same mindset. We *cultivate* our practices by tending to them daily without putting too much concern on the outcome.

It is our job to help establish and maintain favorable conditions for growth and to identify and prune away obstacles to growth, but we *cannot force growth* in any sustainable way.

In other words, *do it*, but don't overdo it.

Just like too much sun, water, or fertilizer will make a plant sick, putting a bunch of pressure on ourselves to "get good" or "do better" or work faster will distort our natural growth and make us sick (blocked, avoidant, burnt-out, depressed, or anxiety-ridden). The same with too little.

The plant will eventually die no matter what we do, but we can help it grow toward full expression in the meanwhile, maybe even dropping some seeds in the process.

Attaining the goal is not the goal (but completing it is still important)

I find working toward an end goal is often a useful motivator to stretch my skill set, but attaining the goal itself is rarely the most valuable part for me. In my experience, *it is the process of growth that generates fulfillment*, not the achievement. Achievement is like an external marker of the end of a process.



I find that when I am sticking to following my own interest and excitement, I'm far less concerned with whatever others think about the byproduct of the work. This is because I've already gotten the nourishment from my engagement with the process.

But while too much emphasis on the goal can get in the way, in order to experience satisfaction, I've still got to call it "finished" at some point and release it out into the world. Recognizing that, I feel both joy and sadness as I come to the end of the long process of making this zine.

The checklist is a tool that emphasizes the cyclical nature of the whole creative process: awareness, scanning for resources, execution, completion, satisfaction, starting over. I set goals in order to give my life direction, without which I would almost certainly revert to the aimless cynical nihilism so familiar to my blocked years.

We really truly are all 100% going to die anyway, so what is the point to all this? My answer is to try to live deeply into the life I actually have, here and now, crappy circumstances and all.

Of course, growing fully into myself is never fully attainable. Following this compass point, however, brings about the stuff that feels really important to me: presence, depth, patience, acceptance, and love. Paradoxically, perhaps, my experience of presence, depth, patience, acceptance, and love has clarified my direction. A chicken/egg sort of thing.

These values are what I am trying to express with my life as I make my silly check marks, wipe them clean, and begin again each day.

If you haven't yet, you could try getting started now... wherever you are, with whatever you've already got. The one guarantee in life is that your time left is always getting shorter.



CRAM FANCY DEGREE INTO ANUS

Another one from when I was first unblocking. I can't help giggling when I see it, especially now that I have a fancy degree of my own. It's obviously in "poor taste" and also a David Shrigley knockoff (look him up and enjoy), but that doesn't change that I love it.

Review of what we covered:

- ✓ The list is a reminder to do what you care about
- ✓ The list is a reminder to do it over and over
- ✓ The list is not a scorecard... but is a reminder that you can follow through
- ✓ You probably already have what you need to begin
- ✓ Don't include must-do's
- ✓ Put your list somewhere you can't avoid it
- ✓ Set low thresholds and try to have fun
- ✓ Don't wait, action precedes motivation
- ✓ Anxiety is overthinking about doing; multitasking makes it worse
- ✓ The list can help lower the stakes
- ✓ The way we do one thing is the way we do everything
- ✓ The list is a reminder to play
- ✓ Revise and remove as you go, try replacing "I should" with "I want"
- ✓ Pay attention to your resistance
- ✓ Attaining the goal is not the goal (but completing it is still important)



STARBOARD '24

Books that were on my mind or on my desk during the making of this thing. This isn't exactly a bibliography or a recommended reading list, but more of a nod to some of the sources that influenced my process. Some of these I read years ago and have fully seeped into the way I think about creativity, some I was actively reading and stealing from as I went along, and there's also one on the stack I haven't read any of yet! :)



You are welcome to share this zine with whomever. Digital and printable copies are available at no cost on my website at jscar.care/zine

I do not use social media, but you are welcome to contact me with questions or curiosities by email at hi@jscar.care; register your complaints on my Yelp page.

Thanks for sharing some of your precious time with me. Good luck out there.

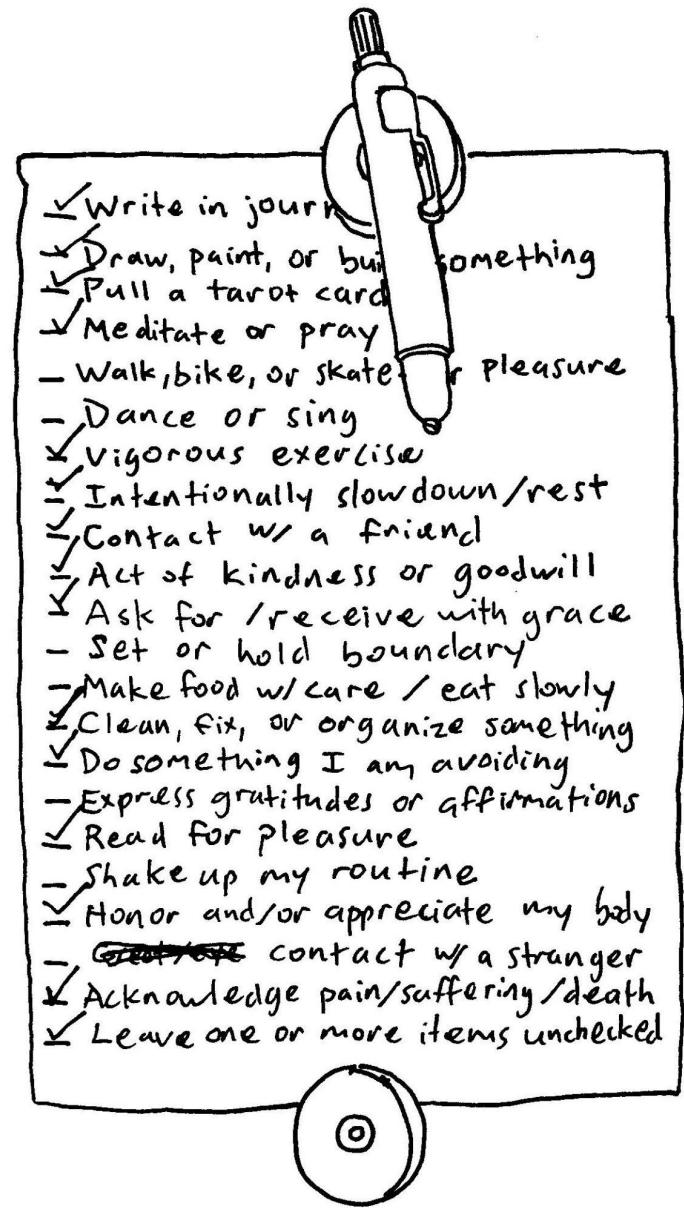
Credit where credit is due

This project did not come into being on its own. Among the many people who contributed both directly and indirectly, I'd like to note special appreciation for:

- ✓ My writing group, the JJ's—Daniel, Rosanna, Cassi, and Ty—for seeing me through some of the worst of it and helping me learn how to be and write more like myself.
- ✓ The early supporters of my art habit—Carla, Rebecca, and Jason—for believing in me and in my work.
- ✓ My friend and supervisor, Deanna—whose stubborn denial of her own creative genius vexed me enough to try and prove her wrong.
- ✓ My friend and colleague, Natalie—who told me about a client's success using a version of my list long before I'd ever considered its potential as a therapeutic tool.
- ✓ My fellow Muck-traveler, Danny—without whom I might still be all brain and no heart.
- ✓ My closest friend, Lindsay—whose refusal to pretend to be anything but who and how she is inspires me to try and do the same.
- ✓ My clients—who honor me with their trust, surprise me with their insights, and motivate me to continue growing in order to be of better service to them and the rest of my community.







Guidelines for making a simple tool to help you get unstuck and establish a creative habit with whatever you have available today

FREE