

FEAR, DOUBT & THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Fear and doubt are both part of the creative process. Let's examine each, beginning with fear, for whether we are novice or master, fear will accompany every artistic creation we care about.

Fear

As I sit down to write this chapter, my notes in stacks of colorful index cards, I find myself fidgeting. Getting up for another glass of water. Checking email again. And again.

Ah! I recognize it. Fear, on cue, sat in my chair ready to work before I did. After decades of creating, it can still take me by surprise, for it is far more punctual and diligent than I. It makes its presence known in seemingly insignificant ways: I think my desk needs cleaning again, the chair needs adjusting, and there aren't enough ice cubes in my water glass.

And then I remember to enact my ritual. It's become a ritual because each time I get to the heart of what I'm creating, fear returns. The more passion I feel, the stronger my fear.

I admit it: I'm scared.

So begins the ritual, the dance fear and I share as partners. I extend my hand, invite it out of the shadows into the light where it has less power over me.

We clasp hands and I smile. "OK, let's hear it." I give it a little twirl.

You think you know what you're going to write, it declares, but you don't. You think it'll make sense, but it won't. Are you sure you want to do this?

You're gonna regret it. You'll make a mess, it shrieks, reminding me of past failures.

I touch my index finger to my lips, shushing it. "You know the rules, we only talk about this moment, this here, this now."

Yeah, well, OK, but... but... It falters, then regains equilibrium. *This will be the time. This time will prove what a failure you are.*

"All lies," I reply. "You're saying nothing new, so you have five more seconds, then you will leave."

(There's nothing to be gained by negotiating with fear.)

It won't give up. Its voice rises in pitch. *You can't do this, this will be a disaster!*

I drop its hand, whirl it around by the shoulders and shove it out of the room. I shut the door and turn the lock.

A pristine, spacious silence opens. It's just what I need to hear my own voice, just what I need to let my passion roam freely, playfully.

I know fear will return, even though I won't consciously unlock that door. When I get excited about the next phase, or the next creative decision that must be made, it'll be there.

And we'll dance our little dance. And if it has anything new to say, I'll listen because it could be valuable. It could lead me in a new direction, or remind me of something I've overlooked. But most often the fear that accompanies my creativity repeats the same threats it has since childhood. So I consciously show it the door.

When I deny my fear and forget my ritual, fear begins to influence my creative decisions. I take fewer risks. My fear-based choices are always the weakest ones.

Knowing what fuels your fear of creating art helps tame it. In the heart of our fear lurks some kind of threat. Perhaps threat of loss, exposure of a weakness, humiliation, pain, or judgment. If you can identify it, you can look this threat squarely in the eye and realize it is probably a phantom. If your creation turns into a mess, that doesn't mean you are weak, untalented, or a failure. If others judge you, you can handle that; it isn't **the end**. When you're conscious of what is being threatened, fear has less power.

Also, consciousness invites you to learn from your fear. And as you learn from it you can reduce it. As you reduce it you can move beyond it and rise above. Fear need not control your art.



Kristy Nijenkamp,
Untitled, 2010
56 cm
Dyed agate, sterling
silver; stringing

Doubt

Easier to work with than fear, doubt can become an artistic partner. It's important for me to know whether I'm dealing with fear or doubt so I can handle it properly. The difference is in the intensity of the feeling. Within fear is a threat. Fear can stop me. Doubt, however, holds no threat. It causes me to hesitate.

I like to dialogue with doubt because it has much to offer. When it says *I doubt you can do this*, I say "What if I can?" or "If I can't do it this way, what if I try it a different way?"

Doubt, when faced head-on, is a flexible springboard that allows me to see differently, to approach the challenge from a new angle. It often nudges me to pay more attention and look deeper. Once I realized this, I welcomed doubt with listening ears. But I don't get mired in it.

You can turn *I doubt I'll ever be able to design spectacular pieces* into "What if I learn all I can about design and commit to creating a necklace a week for three months? What will that teach me about myself?"

If your doubt says *I doubt I can design a necklace that this client will love*, find out exactly what the client loves and specifically why she loves it. This doubt can easily be handled by using the Customer Preference Form on pages 128–129.

If you hear *The colors I choose are boring, I doubt I'll ever be able to make dynamic color harmonies*, transform it by asking "What

if I choose one color and work with it for an entire month using paper, pencil, crayons, fabric, and beads and get to know it intimately? I'll pair it with other colors in all kinds of combinations until I find 10 that I love. Then I'll do the same process with a different color next month!"



Rebecca Starry
QWERTY, 2012
30.5 x 12.7 x 1.7 cm
Seed beads, typewriter parts, assorted findings, ribbon; bead embroidery, right angle weave

DO YOUR WORK

Every once in a while, after the ritual dance is over, when I feel that sacred exhilaration that comes from manifesting a piece more beautiful than I had envisioned, I sense the dark, raptor-shaped shadow circling the periphery of my mind—my fear has returned. It's closing in for the kill. When it comes at me like this, I stop and call for help. My superhero is neither bird nor plane. It is my copy of the book *Art & Fear: Observations On the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking* by David Bayles and Ted Orland. Within a five-minute reading of the dog-eared pages, I'm grounded back into myself, remembering that my journey is more about art-making than end results. I've shared some of Bayles and Orland's most valuable insights below.



My job is to do my work, make my art. Yours is to make your art. Each failure and each success contributes equally to the evolving artist and human being we are and are becoming.

Uncertainty is the essential, inevitable, and all-pervasive companion to your desire to make art. And tolerance for uncertainty is the prerequisite to succeeding.

...every artist must learn that even the failed pieces are essential.

...art is all about starting again.

Between the initial idea and the finished piece lies a gulf we can see across, but never fully chart. The truly special moments in art-making lie in those moments when concept is converted to reality—those moments when the gulf is being crossed. Precise descriptions fail, but it connects to that wonderful condition in which the work seems to make itself and the artist serves only as guide or mediator, allowing all things to be possible.