



The Creative Conversation

ArtMaking as Playful Prayer

Bridget Benton



Chapter 9

Resistance, Judgment, and Completion

*If you're going through hell,
keep going.*

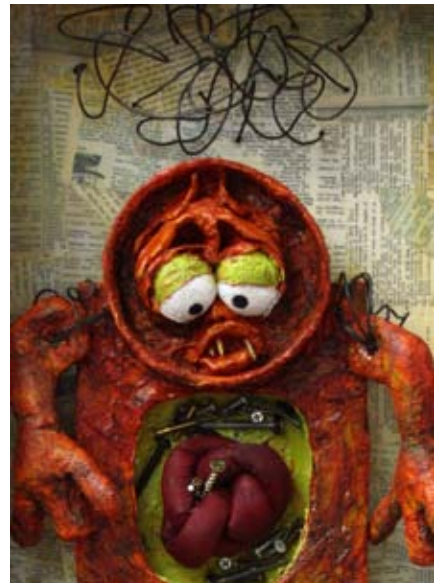
– Winston Churchill

Resistance and Judgment

You've got a place to work. You've got your art supplies and your blank surface. You've read all about how to set your intention and get inspired and take action. You've reviewed everything you need to remember to stay in the artmaking process. And you're thinking that maybe now would be a great time to reorganize your kitchen cabinets so that the canned goods are in alphabetical order.

Okay, maybe that doesn't happen to you. I can tell you it sure happens to me. It happens to me not just around artmaking; it happens every time that I start out alone on a new venture. Practicing yoga. Going camping. Writing this book. Usually, I've taken a class, or read something inspiring, or done something fun with a friend, and decided I want to do more of it. I get all the supplies and then get completely paralyzed. Hello, resistance! Then I feel terrible, like a bad person, for not doing something immediately with all those expensive supplies. I beat myself up for it. Hello, judgment!

Judgment and resistance are like twin super villains, jumping in to gum up the works of the whole creative process. If you find yourself in a classic moment of resistance—too exhausted to make art, bored with what you're making, or determined to clean out the dust bunnies under the couch prior to sitting down to work on that collage—is judgment sneaking around somewhere, whispering in your ear? Is it pushing your inner frustrations out on others, telling you how your obsessive-compulsive boss makes you work too many hours, or that your housemate is a big dust-bunny-generating slob who leaves the house such a mess that you can't make any art? Or is it talking to you directly, using the voice of your inner critic to tell you, foolishly, that you don't know how to draw?



Curiosity: Antidote to Judgment and Resistance

Pat B. Allen has this to say about judgment in her book *Art Is a Spiritual Path*, “Judgments are inevitable and contain important information... information for ourselves... My judgment is a mirror of my values, my fixed ideas. When the image... calls forth my judgment, I have a chance to be curious.” Judgment, like resistance, is a signal to us that something interesting is going on inside of us, just around the corner. Curiosity is an antidote to resistance and judgment. If we can cultivate an attitude of curiosity, then we are letting our own natural inquisitiveness guide us. Like the explorer and the adventurer, we can let go of an attachment or judgment and approach the world with playful wonder, open to whatever it has to share with us. With curiosity as our guide, we can let go of our ideas of how things ought to be

Definition

Curious Adj: Eager to learn; one who lets interest guide investigation and discovery; inquisitive; an attitude of interest, open to a variety of results or outcomes, without judgment; an attitude of playful wonder.

and simply discover what's there. Like the novice, we can become eager to learn. Resistance melts away because we let go of predicting or judging what will happen and instead become excited to see what will happen next.

So, what would happen if instead of being angry or afraid of our critic, we approached the inner voice of judgment with curiosity? Much like a small child, the inner critic wants our attention and it wants to be in charge. Just as with that small child, we can be curious about what the child is saying while setting some very clear boundaries.

A Conversation with Your Critic

Try spending a little time in dialog with your critic, just as you have with your intentions and your artwork. I've found that journaling, physically writing down the conversation between my critic and my other self, is more useful than simply letting them chatter on in my head—or trying to force them to sit quietly in a closet. And it's a way of setting some boundaries. It lets me jump in with questions and guide the conversation based on curiosity rather than defensiveness, fear, or anger. Here are some great questions to direct toward your critic or inner judge when it starts spewing nastiness:

- What is the most important thing you want to share with me right now?
- What do you hope to gain by sharing that with me?
- What, if anything, are you hoping that I will do differently? (Usually, the judge has been triggered by something we're doing or thinking of doing, and it wants to stop us cold in our tracks.)
- What if I keep doing what I've been doing instead? How will that make you feel?

As you start asking these kinds of questions, you may discover that your inner judge is a control freak, or angry, or jealous. Nine times out of ten, my judge is simply scared.

Often, the concerns of the judge or critic are coming straight from a protective instinct, and they are working hard to keep us safe. Your job is to reassure the inner judge that while you refuse to indulge the hysterics, his or her most basic needs will be met. "We will still be loved and be safe even if I make an ugly picture." Once you've found out what unmet need or overwhelming emotion is behind the judge's outburst, you can go into another series of questions:

- If I keep doing what I've been doing, what's the worst that can happen?
- What might we do to make things okay again if that did happen? (or)
What might we do to stay safe and get our needs met even if the worst happens?
- Great! Now that we know we can handle anything that goes wrong, will you please leave me alone for an hour (a day, a week, forever)?

So far, we've done this kind of conversational journaling with our ideas, with our selves, and even with our art, but it may feel silly the first time you

try it with an imaginary segment of yourself. And you may just find it to be invaluable. With this method, we're not looking to kill off any parts of ourselves; we're looking to integrate them. We're assuming that every part of us is there for a reason and has something valuable to offer. The judge may just need some impulse control and a few lessons in mature behavior.

Through Resistance to Meaningful-ness

All art contains some element of self-expression. We are the ones making and we are the ones that the meaning is being expressed through; our personal mark will be on anything we make. Artmaking as playful prayer includes expressing ourselves and exploring our own lexicon of personal meaning. Yet to experience artmaking as a spiritual activity and as prayer, we need to allow meaning to emerge and be expressed in spite of ourselves.

Artmaking is a meaningful experience. Meaning happens in the moment, is experienced, and is then let go. The meaning is in the action of making and the product is just a record of that experience. Much of the resistance we encounter comes from trying too hard to be in control of both the process and the product; most of the deep engagement we experience comes from letting go.

When we engage in the process of making, meanings emerge that we did not intend. You may start out trying to create a shrine to a loved one that celebrates the positive impact they had on your life, and be shocked that you want to put a skull or a rubber rat in it. And it may stop you in your tracks. Interestingly, if you are doing artmaking as playful prayer, this is not the time to go into deep analysis and questioning. Nor is it the time to stop. This is the time to simply do it. Follow the energy, follow the impulse, and put the rat in. As I mentioned earlier, let go of the story and see what the artwork has to say.

Once, while painting an image of the Divine Feminine, I was disturbed by my sudden overwhelming urge to fill the image with phallic symbols. I managed to ignore the disturbance, painted the penises, and ended up with a painting I couldn't possibly have imagined. Similarly, I have watched students struggle with a shrine because they couldn't find a particular image or symbol, only to discover that something better appeared once they let go of their preconceived notions.

Meaning and symbols are complex and subtle. As much as some schools of art therapy and dream interpretation would argue with me, and as much as it is true that many symbols hold universal meaning, forcing meaning onto anything you make can kill what's trying to emerge. It is so tempting for me to say when I'm working on a piece, "Oh, those roots must mean X, so I should put in a Y because that would mean this other thing, which would be really cool." What happens, instead, if I listen—listen to the piece, listen to what was being said before all my analytical brilliance and ego and desire to produce something I can put up on my blog got in the way? Usually, it's something like "Mmmm. Roots. I like roots. I think I'll make more roots." Then, later, when I go back to the piece and gently inquire, I'll realize that the roots have turned into blood vessels and thread, and the potential meanings are more complex than anything my conscious mind might have come up with.

Definition

Meaning Noun: What is intended to be, or actually is, expressed; the purpose or significance of something; full of significance or expression in the moment.

Meaningful Adj: Having function, purpose, or significance in the moment.

An important time to paint is when you resist it the most. The strength of the aversion means that there is something just beneath the surface, thinly disguised, ready to emerge. Resistance is a reminder to probe your inner fears and defenses.

—Stewart Cubley & Michele Cassou

By practicing exploring meaning in our worlds, we are exercising our intuition and insight. We are gently unearthing our own language of symbols and images. We are expanding our ability to listen and communicate with Source. We know all of these things. And they're easy to forget. Making art helps us remember.

So When Is It Done, and When Is It Resistance?

As hard as it is to start a piece, it can also be hard to know when we're done. Often, we are lulled into thinking something is finished because we've filled the space, don't know what to do next, or have achieved some kind of equilibrium in the artmak-



ing. To quote *Life, Paint and Passion*, this is “when the real process begins... when you run out of ideas, when you finally don't know what to do, when the path is narrow... it is then that you have to dig deeper in yourself, to relinquish control... [to] become the receiver rather than the doer.”

As I discussed earlier, being complete brings on a quiet, satisfied, full feeling that I've done what I needed to do, explored every nook and cranny, and asked every question. Resistance—or the false ending—can feel like dissatisfaction, fear, dread, panic, anxiety, or boredom. It's when we say, “Oh this isn't turning out right, I'll just start another one” or “I'm so sick of working on this background.” It's a tired, drained, static feeling. Resistance can also come in the form of pride and/or fear. If you're thinking to yourself, “I really love this banana I drew—it may be the best banana I'll ever draw” or “This looks like a real painting. I don't want to mess it up,” it can keep you from moving forward. Resistance in that form can feel like a kind of mild panic or nervous excitement.

A Conversation with Resistance

If you're feeling panic, fear, or boredom, there may be something in the piece that wants to happen and hasn't happened yet. You may need to have a conversation with your piece like you did when letting go of the story or chatting with your critic. There may be something you wanted to do—and didn't—because it was too hard, too weird, or too risky. If you reach a stopping point and suspect this may be the case—or even if you don't—take a few minutes to ask yourself these questions:

- Is there anything you thought about putting in and didn't?
- Is there anything missing?
- Is there anything you were afraid to add?
- What might happen in the artmaking if you weren't afraid to ruin it?
- What's the biggest risk you could take with the art, while respecting what's already there?

If the answers to any of these questions fill you with a burst of energy, consider following the energy through the artwork to see where it leads. I have only one guideline: As I've mentioned before, whatever you do, respect what you've already done. If you cover over or deconstruct what you've already done, do it because something new has to happen, not because you want to destroy what's there. Violence doesn't break down resistance: It makes martyrs.

Over-Perfecting

For some of us, though, the challenge isn't stopping too soon. The challenge is not stopping soon enough. As many times as we tell ourselves that artmaking as playful prayer is not about the final product, we can get caught up in trying to make it perfect.

I have seen students reduce parts of their paintings to a mangled mush because they kept painting over and over an image, trying to get that one spot just right. In artmaking as playful prayer, you will be better off if you simply lay down the paintbrush and then let it go. You've made the mark; respect that it is what it is. Consider the notion that you can't change it or make it perfect, any more than you can erase a word once it's been spoken aloud. You can simply accept what is there on the page, and then make the next mark.

Making perfect art is not the goal of artmaking as playful prayer. Frankly, even the artwork made for product, the work we see in museums or galleries or eye jealously on the table in front of our classmates, isn't perfect. No piece of art will ever be perfect; it will simply be complete.

A Conversation with Completion

We talked in detail about completion in the last chapter. If you've considered some of the things that signal completion for you, add them to this list. If you think you're done, ask the piece, "Are you complete?" See what comes up. Then, do a quick check-in with yourself. Which of these ring true?

- When you consider it, nothing feels like it is missing or undone.
- You feel content or satisfied when you consider the piece.
- Looking at the piece doesn't trigger any particularly intense emotions, like guilt, fear, or giddiness.
- You have a sense of detachment about the piece. You may feel like you can see it objectively.
- It no longer strikes you as especially amazing or horrible; it simply is what it is.
- It is neither pushing you forward nor holding you back. It no longer has weight or momentum.
- You have learned what you can from the project. You are ready to rest or to move on to a new challenge.
- You can let it go.

Completion

Sometimes, the process of completion will happen naturally. Sometimes, you will need to make a conscious decision that something is complete, let it go or set it aside, and move on. This may happen if you've taken on an overwhelming project, are trapped in over-perfection, or are stuck with a project that is holding you back or that is laden with a lot of guilt or fear. Choosing to stop or set the project aside is one kind of resolution.

Be aware, however, that a stack of incomplete projects "set aside" can be a kind of mental clutter and a real energy drain; too many, and it's a sign of some serious resis-

*All anybody needs to know
about prizes is that Mozart
never won one.*

—Henry Mitchell



*The only way through
resistance is to embrace it—
gently, respectfully, curiously.
To live a creative life, we must
lose our fear of being wrong.*

—Joseph Chilton Pearce

tance going on. Only you will know when it's time to be done with it and let it go or take on the challenge of seeing it through to a different kind of resolution.

Completion and Celebration

When you do reach completion in a piece, take a moment to pause. Too often in our lives, as soon as we finish one thing, we're off to work on another. We barely take a breath to check an item off of our to-do list before starting in on the next task. I want to encourage you to take the time to acknowledge what you've completed.

Celebrating the completion can be very simple. Make a note in your journal that you finished a piece. Describe it. Take a few sentences to note how it felt to work on the piece and how you knew it was done. Even say a quick "Thank you" to the piece for the gifts it gave you. Looking back in your journal after a year, you may be amazed by the amount of work you've completed! You can also take the time to do deeper journaling about each piece, exploring the challenges you faced with the piece and the messages the piece shared with you. If you live in a supportive environment, you may want to display the piece in a special spot, to be replaced by the next work you finish.

You can keep all the finished work in a big folder or on a special shelf, so that when you start to doubt yourself you can look back at the work you've done and see the progress. You may even find that a piece will look very different a month later than it did the day you completed it. You may also want to signal the completion of a piece with a bit of ritual or a special present. Light a scented candle as an offering of thanks or treat yourself to a sparkling apple juice toast. You may also decide to only make trips to the art store following the completion of a piece. This way, new art supplies become a reward for completed work, and not a substitute for artmaking itself.

Sometimes, though, it just doesn't feel like a celebration without other people. If you have friends who support your artmaking, definitely call them up to let them know you finished a piece so they can cheer you on! I'll talk more about building a creative community in the next chapter.

Lying Fallow

Making is a generative process, and we can't generate all the time. I've talked about goofing off and taking time to do the work of inspiration. There is another time we may need to take a break from active creating, and that's right after we've finished a big project. Nature goes through cycles and seasons, including times of intense growth and productivity and times of quiet when what remains breaks down into a base of nutrients that will support the next round of growth. Farmers who are in tune with natural processes and not reliant on chemical fertilizers let fields lie fallow; they also rotate crops to re-energize the soil. Sometimes, you too will need to lie fallow for a while and give your generative self a rest. It's okay to give yourself a little time to build up a layer of inspirationally rich topsoil.

Artful Explorations: Be Curious

Allies and Adversaries



Materials

- Deck of tarot cards (see note below for other options)
- Journal or notepad
- Pen or pencil

A NOTE ON USING TAROT CARDS

I do this exercise with tarot cards because the deck supplies a variety of archetypal symbols that most of us have strong associations with and that are rich with possible interpretation. Also, the simple chance involved in the selection process is a wonderful way of allowing ourselves to just be curious about the outcome. In these exercises, I have used images by Deva Padma from the Osho Zen Tarot.

If you don't have a tarot deck or are uncomfortable using one, try using a book that includes images that have rich symbolism for you. For example, you might try randomly selecting pages from a book on ancient mythology, animals of the Southwest, yoga poses, or the unabridged plays of Shakespeare. How is the downward dog pose an ally or Medusa an adversary? The key is to select a book that is full of associations for you and to select the images or phrases randomly.



1. Take a few moments to consider the biggest challenge facing you in your artmaking. Write your challenge down in your journal in the form of a question, such as “How might I solve the problem of x?”

2. Now, shuffle the deck and select two cards, face down. Flip one of the cards over. For the purposes of this exploration, this card represents your Ally. (Resist the temptation to put the card back and try for something better!)

3. Now, be curious about your Ally. What are the qualities and features represented by the card? If you can, read up on what the card means. How might the strengths—or even the weaknesses—represented by this card support you in overcoming or solving your challenge? What could this card teach you? How could it help you? Take ten minutes and journal about the card and how it might serve as a valuable Ally.

4. Now flip the other card over. For the purposes of this exploration, this card represents your Adversary.

5. Be curious about your Adversary. What are the qualities and features represented by the card? If you can, read up on what the card means. How might the weaknesses—or the strengths—represented by this card be undermining you or making your challenge more difficult to solve? What could this card teach you? How does it serve as a mirror for you? Take ten minutes and journal about the card and how it might serve as a worthy Adversary.

6. Given what your Ally and your Adversary have shared with you, brainstorm 16 ways that you could answer the challenge. Remember, you phrased the challenge as a question for a reason!

TAKING IT FURTHER



Additional Materials

- 3 pieces of cardboard
- Copies of tarot cards you selected
- Mod Podge or gel medium
- Gesso
- Acrylic paints
- Brushes and water container
- Collage materials
- Scissors or craft knife



1. Consider making your own tarot cards to represent your Challenge, your Adversary, and your Ally. Start with three pieces of stiff paper or cardboard (old cereal boxes can be easily cut down to size). Try making them several times larger than an ordinary playing card so that you have plenty of room to work.

2. Now, sort through your collage images and pull things that make you think of the Challenge as well as images that might represent the Ally and the Adversary. You can even make copies of the actual cards you selected and use them as starting points for your Ally and Adversary cards. Either cut out the essential parts for use in your collage, or glue down the whole image and just gesso out the parts that you don't want to include. Then, add in other collage images that speak to you, allowing the cards to develop and change. You may find that your Adversary becomes your Ally, and vice versa. Let that happen. You're exploring.



3. Use acrylic paint to add in details or colors that emphasize the meaning for you. Again, be open to the meanings of the cards shifting as you work on them. One student worked hard on her Adversary card, working to convey a particular meaning, only to come to the realization that this actually represented a very real and beautiful strength of hers. She had worked with this Adversary since childhood and ultimately turned it into an Ally in her life without realizing it.

SUPER SIMPLE OPTION

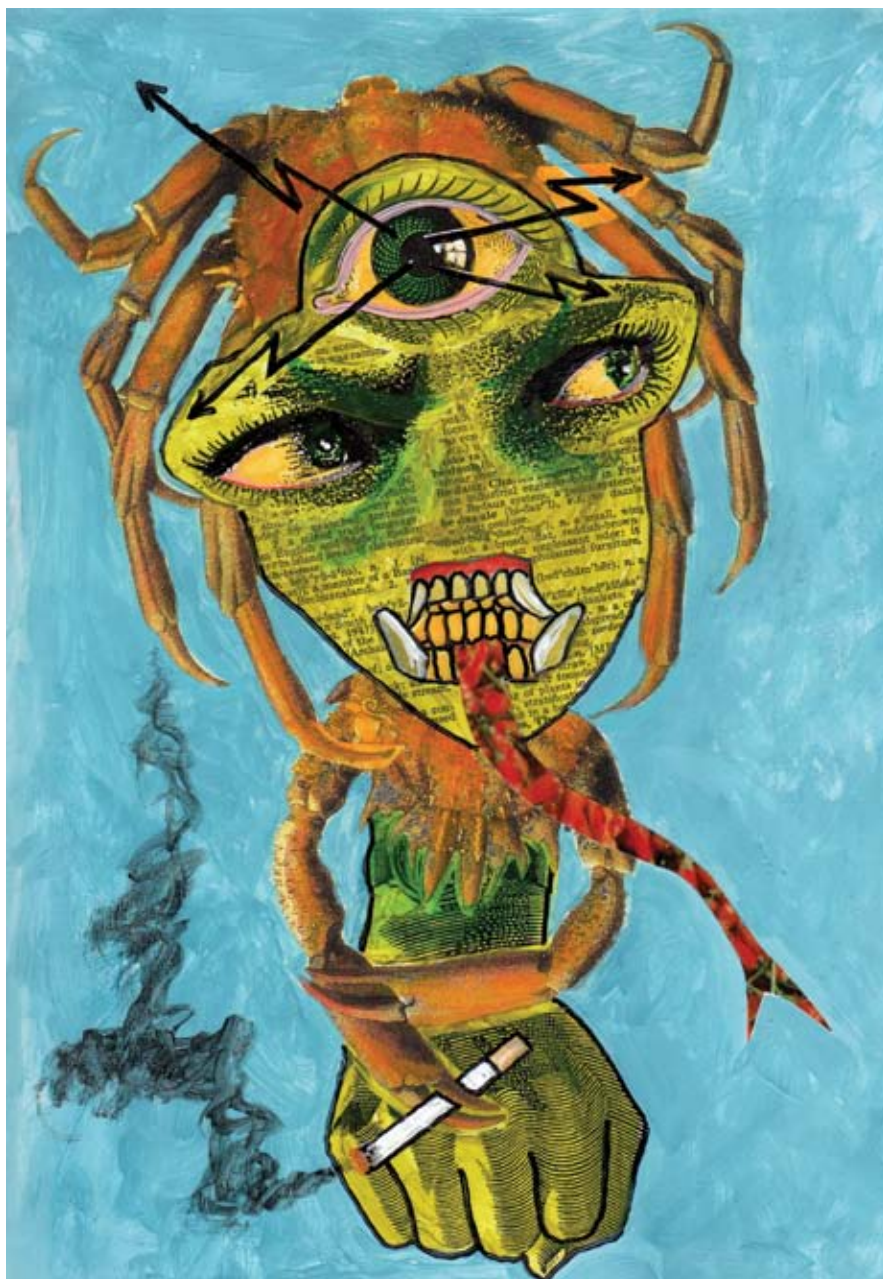
Super Simple Materials

- Blank paper or sketchbook
- Your favorite painting or drawing materials

Consider making your own paintings or drawings of the Challenge, the Ally, and the Adversary. You can use your journaling and the tarot cards or other images as a starting point, and then see where the images themselves take you.

Artful Explorations: Be Curious

Critic Collage



Materials

- Journal or scrap paper
- Pen or pencil
- Junk mail or old magazines
- Other collage materials
- Blank paper or sketchbook
- Glue stick, Mod Podge or gel medium
- Scissors or craft knife



1. Grab your journal and your pen, and take a few moments to consider the voice of your internal Critic. What does the critic say? What tone of voice does it use? What kind of gestures is it making or body language is it using as it says those things? How does the critic make you feel?

2. Now, consider the possible physical characteristics of your critic—is it a particular color? Does it have a specific smell? What is the texture of its skin? Is it like a person you know, or an animal or insect?



3. Once you've spent some time journaling, get your collage materials. Pull out images that make you think of your critic or that have some of the same qualities as your critic. You may also pull images that inspire some of the same feelings your critic does.



4. Next, begin creating your critic. Consider what might comprise the arms or legs or body or head. The uglier and creepier the better!

Ultimately, the critic is a part of ourselves. Strangely, giving the critic its own body or face can make it easier to confront. Try talking to your critic. Does it seem a bit less powerful or a bit more ridiculous now? Are you more empathetic with your critic, or do you better understand its point of view?

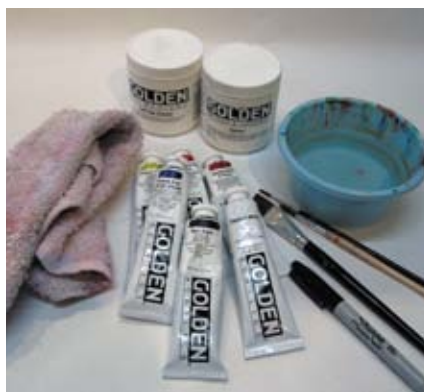
SUPER SIMPLE OPTION

Super Simple Materials

- Blank paper or sketchbook
- Your favorite painting or drawing materials

Begin with the journaling as you would for the standard project. Then, start drawing or painting your critic. See what happens as the image emerges. Does it look like anyone you know? What additional or unexpected features are you inspired to include? Again, the uglier the better!

TAKING IT FURTHER



Additional Materials A

- Found objects, the more beat-up, the better—this might include things like old buttons, little screws, string, or bottle caps
- Thick craft glue like Tacky Glue or Ultimate Glue
- Permanent marker
- Brushes and water container
- Acrylic paint
- Gesso
- Wax paper or palette



A. You might choose to use some thick craft glue and add in other found objects or elements like bits of trash or string. You may also want to draw or paint on top of the collage to add details like beady eyes or claws or fangs or a monocle. As you can see here, I really had fun with the painting option!

Additional Materials B

- Old stuffed animals or toys
- Wire
- Drill
- Even more crazy found objects
- Heavy glue like E6000 or Goop
- Plaster bandages (like those used in mask-making, found at the craft store)
- Apoxie clay
- Acrylic caulk



B. This can also be a very fun project to take 3-D. Even if you've never worked sculpturally before, interesting things can happen. You can dismantle and reassemble second-hand stuffed toys or shape wire into fantastic forms. Small boxes can be glued or wired together and then painted and encrusted with found objects to create strange, ugly creatures. Any form can be covered with plaster bandages, texturized with acrylic caulk, or sculpted and shaped with Apoxie clay to add detail and cohesion to your creation. Making little critics is so much more fun than listening to them!

Here, I took the emotions that drive my critic—anxiety and fear—and made a little creature that utterly embodies those emotions. I used old stuffed animals covered in plaster bandage and acrylic paint to form the limbs, and used boxes covered with plaster bandage, Apoxie clay, collage and acrylic paint to create the body, face and container. The only limit is your imagination.

The Creative Conversation

REDISCOVER THE JOY OF ARTMAKING

Approaching creativity as a form of spiritual practice, artist and creativity guide Bridget Benton breaks the creative process down into its most basic components and offers a fresh perspective on developing your creative skills. Whether you are creatively blocked, burned out, or just want to further explore the world of making, you *can* make art and have fun doing it.

With 24 hands-on Artful Explorations – interesting and varied enough to suit both beginners and professionals – this “workshop in a book” helps you:

- Make art that reflects your authentic inner voice
- Practice the 12 Actions and Attitudes of artmaking that support creative flow
- Develop a more consistent practice with your artmaking
- Engage with your art in a meaningful and mindful way
- Move more easily through resistance, judgment and other blocks
- Create a more connected, intuitive and playful relationship with your artmaking



PHOTO BY MICHAEL BURTON

Author Bridget Benton has worked as a professional artist, facilitator and workshop leader for over 20 years, helping hundreds of adults rekindle their creative spark. She holds a Master of Science in Creative Studies from the International Center for Studies in Creativity at the State University of New York and has taught intuitive creative process at events across the country. She currently lives and paints in Portland, OR.

“... A breakthrough book. It will serve as a beacon for a new generation of creative people, as well as deepen the conversation for those already interested in bringing the metaphor of art-as-a-way-of-being more fully into their lives.”

–Stewart Cubley, co-author of *Life, Paint & Passion*
and director of The Painting Experience

“Bridget Benton’s directness and honesty are refreshing ... This book is a **MUST READ** for anyone interested in growing both artistically and spiritually.”

–Bee Shay, author of *Collage Lab*

“If the idea of creativity as a spiritual practice excites you, then you’ll love this book. If that idea scares you, this book will take you gently by the hand and help you past those fears. Either way, you’ll soon be making yourself a more vibrant life.”

–Diane Gilleland, former editor of CRAFT online and author of *Kanzashi in Bloom*

\$19.95
ISBN 978-0-9844568-1-9
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