

Ep #8: Lower Your Standards to Raise Your Art



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“Lower your standards in order to raise your art.” I have that note to myself scrawled in many journals and even on the wall of my studio. If this seems like a contradiction, it isn’t; it’s a paradox.

In last week’s episode, I talked to you about moon-shots and the power of thinking big. Well, this week, we’re going to take the advice of many great artists and creatives and talk about how, oftentimes, the best way to shoot for the moon is to give yourself the permission and the freedom to create as if you’re shooting for the wastebasket.

You are listening to *The Art School Podcast*, a show for artists and creatives who want to become the next greatest version of themselves. Learn how to cultivate an extraordinary way of being and take the mystery out of making money, and the struggle out of making art. Here is your host, master certified life coach, artist, and former lawyer, Leah Badertscher.

Hello, everyone, how are you? I tell you what, I don’t sound like it maybe because I still have this sinus infection, but otherwise, I am really fantastic. And I will tell you why. So, we leave tomorrow morning for Iowa for a week. That’s where my family is from and we’re going to Christmas in Iowa at my parent’s house, on my parent’s farm for a week, with all my siblings and nieces and nephews.

And it’s going to be crowded, it’s going to be chaotic, there are a lot of people under the age of 10 and below counter-height, and it’s going to be awesome. So I’m really looking forward to that. And then, the week after that, my kids are going to stay with my parents for grandma and grandpa camp, and my husband and I get to go to Hawaii.

So really excited about that as well, and I’m also stoked that this year, far more than any other year, I am like way ahead of the game in terms of Christmas and packing and packing for all five of us – well, my husband packs for himself, but packing for four of us – and then also just having the

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ability to take off for two weeks and the scheduling and the thinking ahead that that requires, getting these podcasts done ahead of time. I'm super grateful for the flexibility and super grateful that I set it up this way, and yes, so excited for Iowa and then Hawaii.

So, let's talk about today's topic. In today's episode, we're going to do something different. I'm going to share with you a recent bit of real coaching. So it's like a Q&A, but we're going to stick to kind of one theme for today.

And I chose this one question because it's something – I get this almost verbatim exact question very often and I also hear variations on this same theme all the time. And I just think it's a theme and a block and something most of us have struggled with at one point or another.

So here's kind of a breakdown of the exchange. Someone said to me, "I'd love to paint big." They already make art, and they said, "But I'd love to paint big. I keep thinking about it, but I'm terrified." So I asked, "Why are you terrified?"

And their response was, "Because it's a lot of materials and money..." Essentially this is what they said, "It takes so much paint and a big canvas, a lot of materials and money, and it would be such a waste if it didn't turn out."

So, I have strong thoughts on this, and here are my thoughts; it's a waste if you don't do it. So the real waste in situations like this is you not going for it. It's a waste of your potential, your talent, your ideas, your inspiration, and your time here. It's a waste of the whisper that you have, to not follow it, and it's a waste of the gifts that could be cultivated.

I love art supplies. Canvas and paint are awesome. And I know they do cost money, but they aren't a human soul and they aren't a human life. And

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I know that might sound dramatic when we're talking about painting and art supplies, but there's always something bigger underneath these questions.

And when people ask questions like this, I take it very seriously because to want to create something and then to not do it, it's like Maya Angelou said, "There's no greater agony than having a story within you and not telling it." Because anyone that doesn't think that these stakes with what seems like a little thing, like someone loving to paint big, that those are big stakes, that's just being asleep at the wheel in my opinion.

So let's say that maybe you don't think this example relates to you because, one, you're either not a painter, or two, maybe you are and you have no problems painting big. Maybe you just don't see how it's relevant to your life.

But before you dismiss it, I want you to think of any area in your life where you could possibly relate to this. What is your version of painting big; that thing you keep thinking you'd like to do, but then you just don't do it because you couldn't justify the time, the money, the resources it would take unless you could be guaranteed it would turn out how you wanted it to.

So this goes back to that paradox I addressed in the intro, that you need to lower your standards in order to raise your art. And that's something that I know people might understand intellectually, but sometimes viscerally, it is so hard to overcome. So I want to offer a few different ways of thinking about that if that's a block for you.

And some people think, it's against my integrity, it wouldn't be responsible, my standards are too high. And I always just say that's kind of a bunch of nonsense, because if you really love something, if your standards are you love it, you're passionate, you care about it, then you're willing to sacrifice ego.

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And a lot of times, when people say integrity and responsibility, what they're talking about is trying to keep themselves aligned with an external expectation, rather than take that emotional risk and risk the external expectation to go for what is really truly in integrity for them. Because, to be in integrity means to live in alignment with your values. To be in integrity does not mean to live in alignment with other people's judgments about you, in other words, your reputation.

So, I'm not saying that – because I don't believe this – that it could be in integrity for you to steal or to somehow hurt somebody. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about really knowing what your values are. And so, if you've got a desire to create something, no matter what that is, then deciding to do that.

And again, there's that risk, deciding to do it even though you're not guaranteed that it's going to turn out how you want it to or as quickly as you want it to. So what is that thing that you want to do but you're not doing because you're afraid of wasting something or jeopardizing something, whether it be time, money, paint, your reputation, what have you, status?

And here's the other thing; our minds are so quick to label something as waste like it's just a fact, like it's irrefutably true, like saying the sky is blue. That canvas where I don't like the painting is a waste. But waste is a very subjective judgment. It's not a fact.

And in addition, I can give you plenty of other definitions, and one of my favorite ones is practice. So let's say you do paint big, you do go for it, then you're practicing what it's like to move on a surface like that, to use that much more pigment and to use probably different tools.

And it's just like your physicality is different, scale is different, everything changes. It's practice. And it's not just my opinion, but you can find abundant examples of artists and creatives who not only don't say, "Hey,

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be creative, make your art, but only if you don't waste any paper or time or money along the way."

In fact, a lot of people say, who have actually been prolific and successful and making art for maybe their whole life, they say pretty much the opposite. Johnny Mercer, for instance, he was a famous songwriter in Hollywood years ago, he was famous for saying, "Write for the wastebasket."

And I was just, last weekend, reading an article about Karl Lagerfeld, who is the creative director for Chanel and also a very prolific artist in his own right. So I was reading this Wall Street Journal article and I was struck that he said something very similar to Johnny Mercer.

He said that he draws for the wastebasket. He draws every day and a lot of it, he said, just ends up in the trash, but almost that that's not to be avoided, but that's the point. So in essence, the way to make art is not to avoid waste, but the way to your art is likely through waste; that it's not only an inevitable part of the process, but an incredibly valuable and necessary one.

So the waste is actually not a waste at all, even if that particular piece, artifact, art, piece of your experience, does not end up in the final project, it was still part of that art. It was still part of that experience and you couldn't have done without it. And I know it can be, like, one thing to think about these things, but it's another if you could really witness examples of it in real life.

So I love thinking about things like this all the time, but still even sometimes my best reminder of the real energy of the creative process, a way that helps me to get is viscerally, is by watching my children make things; paintings, pictures, sculptures of Lego or with clay. And then they've got

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this giant build-it box that is full of garbage, and they just make tons of things from it.

My daughter can whip through stacks and stacks of paper and run markers dry like no one's business. And for her, she never sits there and wonders if she's worthy of that pile of art supplies I've given her. And I will just keep piling them up.

She is five and she knows no differently, and it's beautiful. She just says, "Thank you..." and she dives in. And then it's drawing after drawing. And I think that's a really good example to follow. You see what's there, you say thank you, whether it's inspiration or the supplies, the idea, what have you. Thank you, take what's there, run with it, and dive in.

Another great example is nature. There is this gorgeous magnolia tree in the middle of Notre Dame's campus and I think I've even mentioned it before, because I made a painting based off sketches I'd done of it. And in the spring, when it's a little past its prime, there are so many of those gorgeous silky lush satiny pink and white petals that are constantly falling off the tree and there's a thick carpet of them on the ground below.

So at that time of year, I like to go there and sit on a park bench and just look at it because it is this awesome reminder of just so much beauty there; like how many countless petals. And it just keeps coming, year after year the buds grow, the flowers bloom, and then all of those gorgeous petals just drop to the ground.

Nature is so gorgeously wasteful like that. Because think even of us humans, think of our plight as humans, we are incredibly abundant. We come, we live, and then we too fall to the earth and go, and over and over again.

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There's a generosity and an abundance in that, and then also a leaving, a dying, a taking, that's just the way of nature. And it could be depressing, or it could just remind us that we are creatures of nature, and it could remind us and inspire us to follow the lead of nature, because, whether we like it ourselves, that's our path.

We are being led. And we can resist and try to fool ourselves and be safe and get everything right and pretend that there's no waste, or we can open up and flower and give up everything we have over and over and over again.

And if you recognize that you have this fear of wasting resources, or maybe you've already invested years in another path and you're really dreaming of doing something new and you're worried about what economists would call sunk costs, maybe you have a fear of investing in your dream or some other block like this.

I wanted to demonstrate for you a bit of coaching ala Byron Katie style. We'll have a link to her site in the show notes. She's really amazing and she's known, among other things, for something that's called The Work. It's this powerful method of self-inquiry and she has so many wonderful free resources on her website.

I definitely recommend checking that out, and I'll also walk you through an application here because, applied to a creative block scenario around waste, like the one I've described, the coaching, vis-à-vis The Work, would sound something like this.

So you would ask yourself, is it absolutely true that it would be a waste to paint big if it didn't turn out? And then you answer that honestly. So if you have some evidence, you have some reasons that it would be a waste, you say yes. And if you have some reasons that it would not, you say no.

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But the keyword there is absolutely true. It's not 100% yes if there is also some room for some nos. So if there are nos, or even if not, ask yourself this next question; can you think of any instances in your life where you tried something and failed but it was not a waste? And then, you would write those down.

Next, I want you to imagine holding just this thought in your mind; I'm terrified that it would be a waste if it didn't turn out. Now imagine I could pluck that thought out of your mind like a very specific laser-focused lobotomy. And you would no longer have the ability to ever think that thought. It would be impossible for you to think that thought.

So now, imagine, who would I be without that thought? And then, in the space that follows, whatever that answer is, just notice what the experience is in your head and in your being when you imagine being unable to think the thought, it would be a waste if it didn't turn out.

And then finally, there's a turnaround. So in this instance, a possible turnaround is very close to the one I offered earlier. It would be a waste not to paint big. I also want to offer that, oftentimes, what's going on underneath these blocks has very much to do with a desire to take up space in the world, but a fear of doing so, and a desire just to live and have a right to be and do what we want to do without having to justify our existence and trying to prove that we're worthy of our dream by avoiding any waste or any practice along the way.

So just knowing that can be helpful and knowing that you don't need to apologize for what you want to do, you don't need to justify it. You can waste as much as you want that you are worthy and deserving of that. The other thing I want to say is just to be aware that terror – go back to the emotional exercise, because terror at the beginning of a creative process can also just be a lot of pent up creative energy, because terror and exhilaration can be really close.

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And I know that I've felt that tipping point from one to the other at various times myself, and in fact, once upon a time in that exact same instance where I was afraid to paint big, afraid to give myself permission to do that. and it did feel terrifying. But once I did it, there was such a release, such sheer exhilaration on the other side. So if not having moved through that, I never would have gotten to experience what was on the other side.

Now, this brings me to the part of the podcast where I want you to do more than just listen. I want you to take this information and commit to doing something with it that will move your life closer into alignment with something you dream of doing.

So I want you to do something incredibly indulgent for your inner artist or muse. And that's not to say that it is going to objectively be indulgent, but you're probably going to have some resistance, because think about it, if you didn't have resistance, you would have just done the thing already.

So something that can be helpful is to kind of put yourself outside of yourself and imagine that you had a doting aunt or fairy godmother and they just want to lavish all sorts of love and kindness and gifts upon you, and you're going to become that person. This will likely, for many of you, bring to mind the word spoil and that's not what we're doing here.

Instead, what we're doing is soaking your creative spirit with so much more love, attention, and care than what our very rational minds want to tell us is necessary or responsible. And this doesn't have to cost a lot of money. Oftentimes, it doesn't.

Sometimes, something that costs very little can feel very extravagant when, for so long, we've been worried about not wasting or conserving resources. It could be something like you go to a café by yourself some morning to have breakfast, drink coffee, slowly ready the newspaper and people-

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watch; no agenda, no productivity, no laptop, no making to-do lists or errands or texting.

Just be a person having breakfast in a café, taking your time, reading the paper in the morning sunshine. That would be a great one for you if you're somebody who always is worried about being productive and is scheduled down to the wire. Or it might feel really indulgent to you to buy really nice art supplies, and the big ones.

An area of my life where I did this and it paid such great dividends, and it continues to, was around time, because between being an artist, and a coach, and entrepreneur, a mother of three young children, and the other things I like to do in my life, I was always thinking about, how can I just make the most of time?

And meanwhile, I really had the sense that what I was craving was a lot of white space and a lot of downtime and time to do nothing. I was, like, fanaticizing about just having hours and hours just to go for a walk and have nowhere to go and nothing else to do.

So what felt really scary for me, because even financially, at the time, I felt like I might lose business, I might not be able to afford this approach, but I was walking my talk and honoring the desire in me for white space, for negative space in my life; meaning the negative space around the object, the art term. Not negative as in the opposite of positive, but negative as in open time.

So I instituted a policy for myself where, on Mondays, those aren't working days for me. On Mondays – I call them my miracle Mondays – I get to do whatever I want. And you could call it a coincidence, but I don't think so. My business picked up quite a bit not long after I started doing that.

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I just felt so much better in every aspect of my life. My writing, my art just seemed to flow. I'm definitely on top of things in my business and things are going awesome. So that's just one place where I applied this to my own life.

So I'm suggesting this exercise because what I know to be true is that if you begin to give your creativity, your inner artist, whatever is in you that is asking for attention, if you begin to give it that kind attention and give it what it actually wants, it will return gifts to you in spades.

Think of where you have been depriving yourself and what can you do that you can afford right now? It can be a very tiny action. What can you afford right now if you're being honest with yourself to give yourself what you've been wanting?

Creativity will start to open up to you when you nourish it first, and this applies to your art, but this also applies to your finances if you're a creative entrepreneur or you're in business for yourself. Take the advice of many great creatives and artists; work as if you're shooting for the wastebasket. Lower your standards in order to raise your art.

Thank you again for joining me for *The Art School Podcast*. So if you enjoyed today's show, I would love it if you would take a moment and write a quick review on iTunes. You can do this by heading over again to www.leahcb.com/itunes.

While you're there, also for a limited time, you can still register to win a free Creative Life Audit Session with me. If you're an artist, musician, writer, or other creative, and you feel blocked in any area of your life, a Creative Audit Session can help you identify the root cause of that most frustrating block, and together, we'll work to come up with a customized strategy that will get you back into your prime creative and abundant flow.

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So sign up for that while that's still available and I want to thank you all again for listening. I hope you are preparing to have a very happy New Year. It's unseasonably warm and the sun is shining here in Michigan, so I am out to take a walk and I will see you next time. Have a beautiful week everybody. Bye-bye.