

*The Artist's Guide To*



Ten Strategies For Overcoming Fear  
And Unleashing Creative Confidence

**JED DORSEY**

# Introduction



***“Creativity takes courage.”***

**- Henri Matisse**

## **A Common Question**

I had just locked the storage room door and was walking out of my studio when a woman caught my attention. She had come in and wanted to find out more about my painting classes. After I gave her the schedule, she asked, “But what if I really don’t know what I’m doing?”

I hear that a lot. The words might be different, but the underlying questions are the same: Do I have what it takes? Am I good enough to be creative? Am I creative enough to be good?

## **The Need For Courage**

Whether it is voiced or not, I believe we all deal with insecurities when it comes to artistic pursuits. And those fears want to silence you. Perhaps that’s why the French painter, Henry Matisse, famously said, “Creativity takes courage.”

So, that’s what this is about. I’m writing this to encourage you, or as the word is defined, to “inspire [you] with courage.” I want you to move past fear into freedom.

The fact that you’re reading this tells me you’re already growing and want to keep growing. Good job! You’re probably already taking courageous steps forward in your



creativity. Or maybe you're about to start. But you realize it's not easy, and there are days when you feel intimidated or scared.

### **We've All Been There**

Here's the truth. Whether you've been painting for two hours or twenty years, there are always those moments when fear threatens to steal your joy and freedom.

A couple years ago I was teaching a plein air workshop. The morning was clear and bright, and I set up to paint a beautiful ivy-covered barn, dappled in sunlight. Students pulled up chairs in a semi-circle around me, and I introduced what I would be working on. I was feeling good. Then I started painting.



Me teaching at a plein air workshop a couple years ago.

### **Wanting To Run Away**

Have you had a situation you wanted to flee, but there was nowhere to go? That was how I felt thirty minutes into my painting. I felt like a deer in the headlights. Nothing seemed to be working in my painting. My composition didn't look good. I was having a hard time with colors. What started out as a simple, fun demonstration was quickly derailing into a disaster. I was tense, and inside I could tell my joy in painting had

almost completely disappeared. I was miserable, and I was surrounded by students who were waiting to see something good happen. It was awful.

### **Ruts Are Easy**

It doesn't take much to get stuck in a bad frame of mind. Maybe you're there right now. Maybe you're constantly second-guessing yourself. Maybe you just can't get started with creativity. Maybe you are stuck comparing yourself with other artists and you're being critical of yourself. It's easy to feel discouraged in art. And it's easy to get paralyzed in fear and lose our joy and freedom.

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**As Henry Ford said, “Whether you think you can, or think you can’t – you’re right.”**

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### **You Have What It Takes**

But somehow, you're here. And you know what? I am so excited to be able to encourage you. Because no matter the state of your mind right now, trust me. *You have what it takes to enjoy freedom in art, and you have what it takes to be a good painter.*

Just like so many things, the most important factor in our success is what is happening between our ears. I am confident you have what it takes, but the question is do *you* believe you have what it takes to be a good painter? As Henry Ford said, “Whether you think you can, or think you can’t – you’re right.”

### **Fake It 'Til You Make It**

(Back to my story.) So, there I was: tense, feeling intimidated, painting in front of a group of students, lacking vision, lacking confidence, and wanting to run away. Every thought was so negative. Suddenly, I thought, “Why am I so miserable?” The day was still clear and bright. I was healthy. Standing outside doing something most people would dream to do. Why was I being so negative?

I decided to make a change in my thinking. It was forced at the start. I started thinking and saying phrases like, “This is fun!” “I’m really enjoying this!” “Isn’t this great?!” And

you know what started happening? I started feeling like the words I was thinking and saying. On top of that, I also started feeling so much better about my painting – even to the point that I was excited about it again.



A beautiful scene close to where we used to live in Indianapolis. Photo credit: Cara Zimmerman

### **It Actually Changed Things**

Experiences like the one described have helped me see how important it is to think correctly. My whole perception of the situation changed when I changed my thoughts. I went from being negative and not wanting to be there to being excited about my painting and happy to share that experience with the students. My painting even turned out better because of my attitude change.

Now I'm not suggesting that by simply thinking or saying, "This is a masterpiece I'm working on," we will automatically create beautiful, museum-quality works of art. No, there's more to our journey than just changing our thoughts. However, *if we don't replace the negative thoughts* that all-too-easily creep into our heads, we *will* end up short-circuiting our endeavors to grow, to try, to create.

## **Training for Growth**

The great news is that you can train your mind away from this black hole thinking and toward real success. You don't have to let fear hold you back. You *can* move in the direction of growth and vibrant freedom and confidence. We may not be able to avoid fear, but we don't have to be enslaved by it. That's why I wrote this. I want you to fully realize who you can be as you express your creative self. There is only one you, and I'm thrilled to see where you end up.

***“Blessed are they who see beautiful things in humble places where other people see nothing.”***

**- Camille Pissarro**

## Strategy 1: Focus on the Positives



***“Remember one rule of thumb: The more scared we are of a work or calling, the more sure we can be that we have to do it.”***

**- Steven Pressfield**

### **Giving Up**

Even though we were only about thirty minutes into the painting class I was teaching, she had given up. Her brushes were sitting on her palette, still needing to be washed, but she was done.

“I just don’t feel like painting today. I can’t get this road right, and...” her voice trailed off.

I looked at her painting which was seventy-five percent blocked in with colors to see what I could find that I loved.

“Okay,” I started, “would you mind if I told you some things that I love about your painting?”



A few minutes later, she had picked up her brushes again, and she was painting with renewed vigor. At the end of the class, she said, “Thank you so much for not letting me quit. I had such a good time today.”



### **Celebrate Progress**

I’m not sure what it is, but in my own experience and in the years of teaching others, I’ve seen this common thread throughout. It’s extremely easy for us to get down on ourselves. That’s why it’s so important to focus on the positives in your artistic journey and realize that you’re making progress – even if it seems slow. Each of us is on an individual journey, and I don’t know anyone who has had the short road to success. While the journey is long, there are small successes along the way, and we need to celebrate those.

### **Feedback from Others**

If you’ve ever taken a course where creativity is crucial, you’ve probably, or hopefully, had an instructor who reminded students during group critiques to identify some positives about the person’s work before delivering any negatives. Why is that



important? Because when our work is being critiqued, if we first hear what we've done well, we're much more receptive to it than listening to what we can improve upon. The act of creativity can feel so scary, and we tend toward insecurity, so having other people affirm what we've done well can help us see some great things we might not have noticed.

### **Personal Feedback**

Remember, a critique should never, ever only include negative feedback. But what about when we are alone? This is where it can get trickier, and we need to use this same technique in our inner dialogue. This can be a battle because our minds seem hardwired for negativity and self-criticism. We need to train ourselves to first see what's working well. We must be kind and constructive toward ourselves the same way we would toward a peer.



### **What Do You Love?**

When I'm teaching, I always ask my students, "What do you love about your painting?" I don't let anyone get by without telling me at least one thing. And this is important for

us to do when we are by ourselves. What are you happy with? Does your eye keep going to the juxtaposition of orange against red? Is there a certain hue of blue that you discovered you love? Did you try a new technique like a vibrant underpainting that is adding an extra glow to your piece?

It doesn't matter what it is, always look to the positives first. With each session or each piece, there will always be something good about what you've produced. The good might be the joyful experience of working with paint and learning from a new instructor or from experimenting on your own. Once you've established this baseline for success, you can allow yourself to constructively assess what you can improve.



A good friend of mine, Justin Vining, whose outlook & work ethic I admire greatly.

### **Voice Your Strengths**

Another important aspect of staying positive is voicing our strengths. When someone asks about your painting or your painting practice, don't immediately begin telling them how terrible it is or that you aren't a very good painter. Start out positive. Point out what you're proud of or what you've been working to improve upon.

One of my best artist friends, Justin Vining, is excellent at this. He is upbeat and positive, and I've heard his positivity come across countless times when he is talking to admirers of his work. It's probably part of the reason he sells hundreds of paintings each year. Collectors are drawn to his paintings *and* his passion. He loves being an artist, and his enthusiasm carries over into his conversations and allows him to freely say what he loves about his own paintings. It's a quality I admire.

### **Share Your Joy**

The truth is, we must be mindful to speak of our work in the way we'd like others to view it. If you've been working on composition, point out what's working in your painting and what you did to create that success. Maybe you've been experimenting with texture, painterly strokes, or a new medium; perhaps you've created your first plein air painting. Talk about what that experience was like and what you enjoyed about it. Tell people what you love about your work and watch them begin to appreciate your strengths.

### **Keep Watch Over Your Thoughts**

Remember that art by design is an extension of ourselves and our world, and you have something unique and good to offer. To do your best, you will need to keep watch over your thoughts because staying positive takes practice. But you can do it, and when you do, everything else will begin to fall into place. You will be able to take one courageous step after another on your artistic journey.

***"Self-doubt is utterly crippling to painters. Nothing will mess up our efforts more effectively than believing that we lack 'what it takes.' Well, no one knows what it takes, so how could anyone possibly know if they don't have it? They can't and you can't. Therefore, always give yourself the benefit of the doubt."***

***- Richard Schmid***

## Strategy 2: Work Toward Goals



*“Inspiration does exist, but it must find you working.”*

–Pablo Picasso

*“The most important thing about art is to work. Nothing else matters except sitting down every day and trying.”*

–Steven Pressfield

### **Against the Odds**

In a small house near Helena, Montana, she woke up every day to draw, paint, and create in the early morning before the sun rose. As a pioneering mom living on a ranch in Montana through the Great Depression, she had an unrelenting desire to provide and send her kids to college. With her goal in front of her, she rose before the sun every day to illustrate books and create comic strips for nationally syndicated papers. And you know what? She accomplished her goal. Her name was Fanny Y. Cory, and she was my great-grandmother.





My great-grandmother Fanny Y. Cory in her older years, still following her painting practice.

### **Why Goals?**

We need to have goals in art. But why? If painting is something you enjoy, why would you want to set aside time and force yourself to do it? Because like any skill you'd like to become good at, it's important to have a painting practice in order to get better. As Harley Brown said, "[Confidence] cannot come cheaply. It's not a freebie. Many things in life are, but confidence is not one of them."

### **It Takes Effort**

Remember how long it took to learn how to downhill ski, dance the tango, or bake that perfect soufflé? Painting is no different. It requires practice. If we want to get better, then we can't let ourselves believe we won't have to work at it. The awesome thing is that if we are doing something we enjoy, it won't feel like work at all. But it still takes discipline. If you can figure out how to carve out twenty minutes or an hour a day to watch a painting lesson online or to work on a drawing or painting, it will make

a huge difference. If my great-grandma didn't have a goal or set up a regular practice to reach it, there is no way she would have achieved what she did.



My great-grandmother's studio in Montana.

But what does it mean to have a painting practice? Does that mean to wake up before the sun every day? Or spend all day toiling away like the old masters? Depending on your goals, it will be different for everyone. Most of us lead busy lives with a myriad of competing responsibilities, and our desires with art vary. For you, painting might be a fun hobby. It might be something you enjoy doing with others, or maybe it's your quiet escape. You might simply enjoy the process. Or maybe you dream of being a full-time artist.

### **What Is Your Goal?**

Knowing what you want out of a painting practice is key to deciding how to go about creating one. Is your goal to master acrylic painting and sell your artwork online or in galleries? Is your goal to become proficient in multiple painting mediums: watercolor, acrylic, oil, gouache, egg tempura. Are you interested in painting for your personal enjoyment or to improve your mental health? Do you want to meet new people by joining painting groups to wrap painting into your social life? Do you want to learn how to paint outside? There is no right or wrong answer. It is personal to you. But it's

important to answer this question. What are your goals regarding your ventures in painting?



### **Get Your Calendar Out**

Once you've established what your goals are, you can begin to lay out a plan for what your painting practice should ideally look like. This is a practical way I always encourage new members of Acrylic University. If we want to grow, we need to plan for it. So, create a list or a chart with daily, weekly, or monthly goals for your painting practice. Schedule specific times when you'll paint and then create appointments on your calendar. If something comes up, reschedule that appointment the same way you would any other commitment.

### **A Story of Determination**

I remember a story one of my early instructors, Robert Genn, shared in a workshop. He had just graduated from art school. He wanted to be a professional artist but didn't have any galleries or contacts and very limited money. He had a studio and a dream. And a girlfriend. But he decided he would pour everything into his art. For six months, he locked himself in his studio. He ate rice and beans and painted. He focused solely on his goal.

After a week without any contact, his girlfriend came over and knocked on his door. He could see her silhouette in the frosted glass window, but instead of opening the door, he hid around the corner so she wouldn't see his shadow moving around or hear anything. After a few minutes of knocking, she gave up. She came back a few more times to reach him, but after two weeks, she had given up. He never saw her again.

### **Did It Work?**

Now that's a pretty extreme example (and, to be clear, I'm not advocating doing that!), but it does show what it can look like to have a goal and really work toward it. But the real question is, did it work? Did he make his goal? Well, at the end of the six months, he laid out his hundred plus paintings so he could view them all at once. He chose what he considered his ten best. He burned the rest. Then he took the top ten to a gallery, left a note with them, and walked away. The next day, they called wanting to represent him. He went on to become one of the most sought-after Canadian artists of all time and has influenced thousands of other artists.



Robert Genn, one of the original plein air painters working in acrylics.

### **Unique Person, Unique Goals**

Like Fanny Y. Cory, Robert Genn had a goal, and because he had a goal and worked toward it, he did a lot. Imagine if he had never set any goal in art. As they say, "If you aim at nothing, you'll hit it every time." Your goal does not need to be the same as Robert Genn's goal. Or mine. Or anyone else's. In fact, it shouldn't be. You are yourself, and your goals can be unique. The point is this: Creating goals for yourself will benefit you and spur you on to greater growth and enjoyment of painting.



## **Action Steps**

Once you've determined what your goals are, you'll want to create a concrete plan for how you'll reach them. If you want to better understand a new medium, is there a class you can enroll in or a mentor you can work with? If socializing is a part of your goal, can you schedule a group trip to a museum or an art show? Maybe you can coordinate to paint plein air with a group? Your goals can be broken down into steps, too. If you want to enjoy painting (that's your goal), and you're finding you're frustrated because you are having a hard time mixing colors, you can set some small goals related to that. You can take a course or read a book. Or practice mixing colors on your palette. You can set a goal to do ten color studies (small practice paintings) in the next month.

## **Consistency Is The Key**

Look at your time realistically and decide how much and how often you can carve out to commit. Ideally, putting in several hours every day will produce consistent results, but not everyone has that kind of time. Even finding thirty to forty minutes a few days a week will produce change. You can set goals to work on composition, lighting, or mixing. You can engage in specific assignments and watch your work improve. Having a regular painting practice allows you to really hone in on your techniques and see real growth. Before long you'll have met your goals and be working to set new ones.

***“Lord, grant that I may always desire more than I accomplish.”***

**- Michelangelo**

## Strategy 3: Analyze your Paintings over Time



***“Every artist was first an amateur.”***

**- Ralph Waldo Emerson**

### **Rooftop Spill**

House painting was the first real job I had. I remember being sixteen and on the roof of a house. I had a gallon of paint and a paint brush, and I was trying not to fall off. I don't remember how it happened, but suddenly I tipped my can and spilled a whole bunch of light green paint on the black roof shingles. So, there I was, trying to discreetly clean off the roof before my boss (or worse, the owner of the house) saw, and a small task that should have taken ten minutes ballooned into an hour-long episode.

### **Slow Transformation**

Amazingly, I made it through that first job and first summer. I got better at what I did. I learned the tricks of the house painting trade over the next few summers. Eventually I

was a crew leader. Later, I owned my own house painting business and worked in multi-million-dollar homes. What happened? How did that kid spilling paint turn into someone who would be sought out for custom work? One of the biggest factors was simply this: time.

### **We Need Perspective**

The problem is when we get stuck in the moment and lose perspective it can feel like we aren't making progress. When I was up on that rooftop trying to clean up the paint I'd spilled, I felt horrible. I felt like a complete failure. But what I didn't know was that I was learning a valuable lesson right then. I was learning that you never should try to paint out of a full gallon. It is too easy to spill. Instead, you should pour a small amount of paint into another empty can to paint.



Me painting on a rooftop when I was in college.

### **Growth Encourages Growth**

When I think back to that first summer of house painting, it's easy for me to see how I've grown. I might not be using those skills anymore, but I haven't forgotten them. It's the same thing with art. When I look back at my early paintings, I can say with confidence, "Yes, I've grown since I started!"

When we know we are growing, it gives us encouragement to keep taking steps forward. Each step forward helps us grow in confidence as we claim new territory and gain new knowledge and skills.

### **Where Did You Start?**

If you are feeling stuck or discouraged, this is what I recommend. Go back and look at your work from the beginning. Look for all the ways in which you've made progress. Where do your new paintings succeed where an older version wasn't quite there? Do you know yourself better as an artist and thus feel more confident in your own style? Can you remember back to when you were hesitant to paint in front of people? Have you changed mediums and discovered one you absolutely love? Do you understand value better? Do you understand how to use any tools of the trade better since you first started? Have you improved any painting techniques?

### **Looking Back**

Through comparison with older work, you'll be able to identify patterns of strengths to embellish and weaknesses to improve upon. Sometimes it's difficult to see that we are progressing at all, and that is when a look back can be most helpful. We will find encouragement in the fact we *have* grown. The trick is not to compare your work too often, or you might not be able to see change. I'd recommend painting for a few months at least before you do any real comparing.

But how should we compare? Do you remember the rules of positive critique? This is a great time to apply them. Always ask yourself what you love about those earlier paintings? Sometimes that will be a lot and sometimes just one or two things. Even if it was just the subject matter, there's still something good about them. Don't forget, too, that those old paintings – even if you think they were failures – represent your progress as an artist, and they are valuable because of that. Like my painting-on-the-roof incident, you may simply have learned something not to do. But each lesson you learn is big.

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**We will find encouragement in  
the fact that we *have* grown.**

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### **Old Painting, New Inspiration**

Sometimes when you look back at older work, you might even find a painting you want to work on again. Robert Genn, my instructor I mentioned earlier, used to have a storage shed on his property where he kept his “not-quite-there-yet” paintings. Over time, he had hundreds, and when he was looking for his next project, he would



occasionally visit that shed and pull out one of his older paintings to work on. Many of them were eventually transformed into great paintings that ended up in collectors' homes. When we get some distance from our paintings, it often helps us see them in a new light, and we can make better decisions because of that.

So, a couple thoughts for if you do decide to work on an older painting. First, make sure you photograph your painting before you start so you can then compare the updated version to the old one and see which you prefer and why. Second, remember there is no failure here. Every time you paint, you will be learning. Even if your new painting turns out worse than the original, that's okay. You just learned some things, which means you grew, and that is a great success.

### **Consistency Is Still Key**

It's also important to know that looking back at old paintings will only reveal growth if you are putting in consistent effort. If you don't paint for an extended amount of time, don't be surprised if, when you pick up the paint brushes again, it feels like you've regressed. It's just like anything. You've gotten a bit rusty. But that doesn't mean you lost your skills or abilities. You just need to get back in the groove.

### **Another Reason to Look Back**

But what if you *have been* painting consistently and are in a rut? Well, looking back at older paintings can be helpful in this case as it can help remind you what you have done well in the past. Go back and find a painting you did that you love. Ask yourself what was great about it and try to emulate the techniques you used to create that painting. Was it the composition, lighting, color palette choice, or subject matter? Can you incorporate something you love from an old painting into a new work?

I have a few of my early paintings in our house. Sometimes I look at them and think, "How did I do that?" There is a freshness and freedom that I love, and it's helpful for me to see them because they remind me to paint with liberty and not take myself too seriously. Sometimes they give me ideas that I can incorporate into new works.



One of my early paintings from years ago that I still really like.

### **Growth & Love**

There will always be things that can be improved upon, but looking back at old paintings can certainly inspire us and help us break out of ruts. Sometimes it's by showing us how we've grown, and sometimes it's by showing us what we love and have done well. If you feel stuck, go back and look at some of your previous paintings. Figure out what you love about them. See where you've grown. Let those older paintings motivate you because as you continue to work, you will continue to grow. Who knows where you'll be in another six months.

***“By working hard, old man, I hope to make something good one day. I haven’t yet, but I am pursuing it and fighting for it.”***

**- Vincent van Gogh**

## Strategy 4: Copy a Master



***“What is originality? Undetected plagiarism.”***

**–William Ralph Inge**

***“Those who do not want to imitate anything, produce nothing.”***

**–Salvador Dalí**

### **A Hero**

One of my artist heroes is the late Russian-American artist, Sergei Bongart. His expressive use of color is fantastic, and I often have studied his work to figure out how he did what he did. Then, a few years ago, I took my study a step further and did my best to copy one of his paintings. It was a simple scene - just a fence and gate with some flowers and trees in the background. But the colors, oh my! There are greens of every variation, violets, yellows, and earth tones – all coming together to create a beautiful, vibrant, luscious painting.



"My Garden" by Sergei Bongart. This is one of his paintings that I loved and decided to copy at one point to learn about the different shades of green he used. (The photo doesn't represent the real colors well, by the way.)

### **What I Learned from Copying**

In copying that painting, I had the opportunity to match each color and see how he had used them together. I learned a ton about mixing different greens in that process, which was one of my main goals. I wasn't trying to create a painting I could sell. I simply wanted to learn. I wasn't changing anything substantial in the composition or colors or anything. I was attempting to reproduce it as closely as I could because I was gaining knowledge through the experience. That was and is the point of the exercise.

### **Copying Doesn't Make It Easy**

You can do the same thing with any artist you admire. Find a painting that you love. Think about why you love it. Is it the subject matter? The colors? The brushwork? What draws you into that painting? Once you can articulate what you love about it, set out to do your best study of the painting. Don't be surprised if it is difficult and you struggle in the process. That is good. You might be stretching yourself in new ways.



That is how you grow. And never feel bad about copying a painting you admire. It is a wonderful way to learn, and artists through the centuries have done this.

### **Another Way**

But there's another way to imitate a master. This is less about copying the painting exactly as it is but rather about learning the concepts that make the painting work and applying them in your own work. This allows you to create an original painting that is your own while building it on the solid foundation someone else already laid. So, let's look at that now.

Maybe you love painting seascapes. Maybe it's big skies that speak to you. Or maybe you love more abstract work. Whatever it is that appeals to you, this method can apply to any style or subject matter.

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**If you love the color harmony  
of a painting and the general  
composition why not take those  
ideas and use them in your own  
painting?**

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### **Breaking Down A Successful Painting**

When you see a painting you love, there are probably a few reasons:

1. You love the subject matter.
2. You love the design of the piece.
3. You love the colors whether vibrant or muted.
4. You love the texture of the painting.
5. You love the sense of atmosphere.

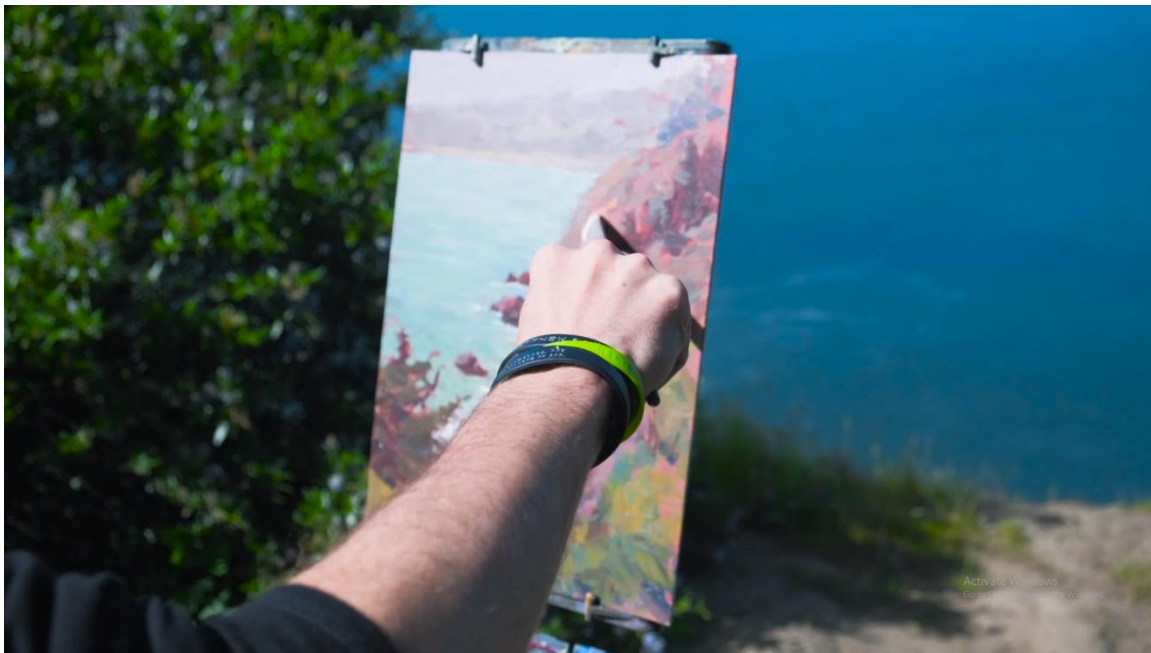
There could be other factors, but as far as the visual components, these are what likely made you love the painting, and more than likely it was several, or all, of those elements working together. So, if you can figure out what draws you to certain paintings, then you can pull elements from them.

### **Don't Reinvent the Wheel**

For instance, if you love the color harmony of a painting and the general composition, why not take those ideas and use them in your own painting? Change the subject matter and the way some of it is laid out. Use your own reference photos or imagination to make changes, but you already have a winning idea to work from.

### **Be Observant**

The more you try to figure out why the original painting worked so well, the more you will learn about what you can do in your own. Get used to looking for subtleties. For instance, how did the artist use soft edges versus hard edges to move your eye where they wanted to? What is it about the design that keeps you interested? How do the brushstrokes convey energy or calmness in the painting? All of these are elements you can freely take and use in your own work, and with practice, they will produce the same effects and bring out the same emotions there.



A video scene of me painting along the ocean near San Francisco.

### **Painting Alongside**

So, those are two ways you can look at a finished work and imitate what the artist did. But there is still a third way, and it also is a fantastic way to learn as it involves watching a painting in process. In fact, I regularly encourage this kind of copying, both in our Acrylic University online courses and in-person workshops. This form of learning is incredibly valuable because you are learning not just how to assemble a good

composition, create a sense of lighting, and choose colors that complement one another, you are also learning the processes for layering, creating brushwork, and using the paint. By painting along with someone you are learning *process*, which is just as valuable as the end product.

### **At the End of the Copy**

You can use these methods of imitation over and over with any number of painters and works. All these methods are simply ways to practice. Before you know it, you'll find that you're not only able to emulate the techniques of the master, but you'll also find your own artistic voice. By learning the painting process and studying how a painting is composed, you are gaining skills and techniques that help you move forward with great confidence. You'll realize you can paint anything because the same principles apply to every subject. You will see the world with fresh eyes, and you will find new joy in your artistic pursuit.

***“Start copying what you love. Copy, copy, copy. At the end of the copy, you will find yourself.”***

**- Austin Kleon**

## Strategy 5: Find Your People



*“The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away.”*

–Pablo Picasso

### **My First Attempt**

When I was in my late twenties, I wanted to be a professional artist. I believed I had the skill I needed to do it, so I took a risk and went for it. I rented a studio in an area of Vancouver, BC, called Gastown. It’s a cool, historical area where the city first started. My wife and I lived in Kitsilano about twenty minutes away. Every day, I would get on the bus and ride to Gastown, walk the last couple blocks, and climb the stairs to the studio, which was on the third floor. My studio had tall ceilings and big north-facing windows looking out over the street where I could watch thousands of tourists flock to watch the old steam clock every day. It was amazing. I was so excited, but...

### **I Only Lasted Two Weeks**

It had nothing to do with me not producing good paintings. I was working hard and, even just in that short time, took leaps forward in confidence in my ability to paint



anything. It also had nothing to do with the location or building or anything like that. That was all great. It wasn't because I didn't sell anything in those two weeks. I had upcoming shows where I was anticipating good sales.

### **Why I Quit**

The reason I only lasted two weeks was that I felt so alone. I rode the bus alone. Walked to the studio alone. Painted alone. Ate lunch alone. Painted alone again. Got back on the bus alone. Day after day after day.

At the end of two weeks, I was convinced I couldn't be a full-time artist. And if it wasn't for discovering a new way of being an artist in community years later, I never would have tried it again.



The steam clock across from my studio in Gastown. You can spot my corner studio window on the 3rd floor just below the tree branch.

### **You're Not Alone**

The good news is that for every activity in the world, whether it's skateboarding, hang-gliding, creating felted gnomes, tiny house living, or art, there are thousands and often millions of people who love it as much as you do.

Maybe you love the solitude of painting, and it's an escape from the busy world. But for most of us, finding people with whom we can learn, grow, and commiserate is vital to growing and becoming confident about our art. Whether or not you are together physically isn't always the most important thing either. What matters is feeling like you are on the creative journey with other people, and you're able to share your successes and challenges. In so doing, you will be able to support and be supported by others.

### Connecting Points

So, what does it mean to find your people if you aren't even sure exactly who you are as an artist? Or what if you live in an area where you can't find other artists? There are many ways to connect with other artists and grow. Here are a few thoughts and ideas you might try.

- **Join an arts club or organization.** If you live in an area with other artists, there are likely clubs and organizations already in place for you to join. Search online in your area or ask other artists what groups they belong to. Most groups welcome new members and offer benefits like group shows, volunteer opportunities, classes, seminars, and fellowship.



- **Enroll in an online art class**, like the ones we have at Acrylic University (<https://www.acrylicuniversity.com/>). We value relationships and seek to provide opportunities for people to connect and share their progress with each other. But it's not just us. A lot of online courses offer

opportunities to connect with others, and they can lead to great friendships, which last a long time.

- **Enroll in a local art class.** Most areas have paint along classes or structured classes in various mediums from watercolor to acrylic to gouache. You can connect with students, make friends, and build relationships with students and teachers. (If you are ever near Seattle, take the road north an hour, and you can come to one of our studio classes at Dorsey Fine Art Studio!)



- **Join a plein air group.** If you can't find one in your area, create one. Getting together with other painters outdoors to paint in a different location each week or month can be a wonderful way to interact and learn from other painters. Search Facebook for a local group or create one yourself, or next time you meet a plein air painter, ask if he or she ever paints with a group. Often other painters are also looking for community. I've been fortunate to be part of several plein air groups, and even be on the faculty at the Plein Air Convention, which brings people from around the world together.  
(<https://pleinairconvention.com> for that, and <https://outdoorpainter.com> is also a good resource.)
- **Check at your local art supply store.** There are usually bulletin boards with classes, or they may know of a group you can join.

- **Go to art shows and connect with other art lovers.** Art shows are filled with people who love and buy art as well as other artists who come to appreciate the art and study a painter's technique. Strike up a conversation; see where it goes. You may make a connection. But be mindful that an art show isn't a place to tout your own work to the gallery owner or the artist whose work is featured. Those conversations are for a later time.

### **We're Better Off Together**

Remember that no matter what stage of expertise you are in, there will always be people who have greater skill than you as well as people who can learn from you. We all have something to gain from one another. Creating friends within the art community will open doors to opportunities you never knew existed, and those friendships will be a source of ongoing encouragement for your own endeavors. Find your people. You're not alone.

***“Friendship is the source of the greatest pleasures, and without friends even the most agreeable pursuits become tedious.”***

**- St. Thomas Aquinas**

***“A word of encouragement during a failure is worth more than an hour of praise after success.”***

**- Unknown**



## Strategy 6: Get Great Instruction



***“The great geniuses are those who have kept their childlike spirit and have added to it breadth of vision and experience.”***

**- Alfred Stieglitz**

### **Discovering Art Again**

When I was twenty-five, I discovered acrylic paints. My wife, Renae, and I had been married for two years, and we were in Whistler, BC, to celebrate our anniversary. I didn't know how much my life would change because of that visit.

The first day as we looked around, we strolled into an art gallery, and what I encountered that day blew me away. I'd grown up around art. And great art. My dad is an amazing artist. But we as a family had always worked in watercolor. In that gallery, I stood in front of paintings that were different. For one thing, they were bigger than any of the watercolors I'd seen.



The gallery Renae and I visited in Whistler, BC.

## Speechless

I stood there not able to move. I couldn't believe what I was seeing: paintings that were so beautiful they almost made me weep. We stayed for an hour, and finally my wife dragged me away. But the next day I went back. And the next. And the next. Seven days in a row – our whole trip.

I probably spent an hour every day at that gallery. There were two artists whose work stood out to me the most. Mike Svob was one, and Robert Genn, the other. I studied those paintings. I looked at the brushstrokes. I tried to figure out how the artists had painted them. I wanted to paint like that.



An example of a painting by Mike Svob... something similar to what I would have seen that day long ago.

### **No Delay**

Seeing my interest, the gallery owner recommended I try painting in acrylics. There happened to be a small art store close by, so I ran back to the resort room, grabbed Renae, and told her I wanted to buy some paints. She accommodated, and I got my first paints and began trying to figure them out. The problem was that I didn't have any clue what I was doing. My painting experience had been with watercolors, so I just painted like they were watercolors.

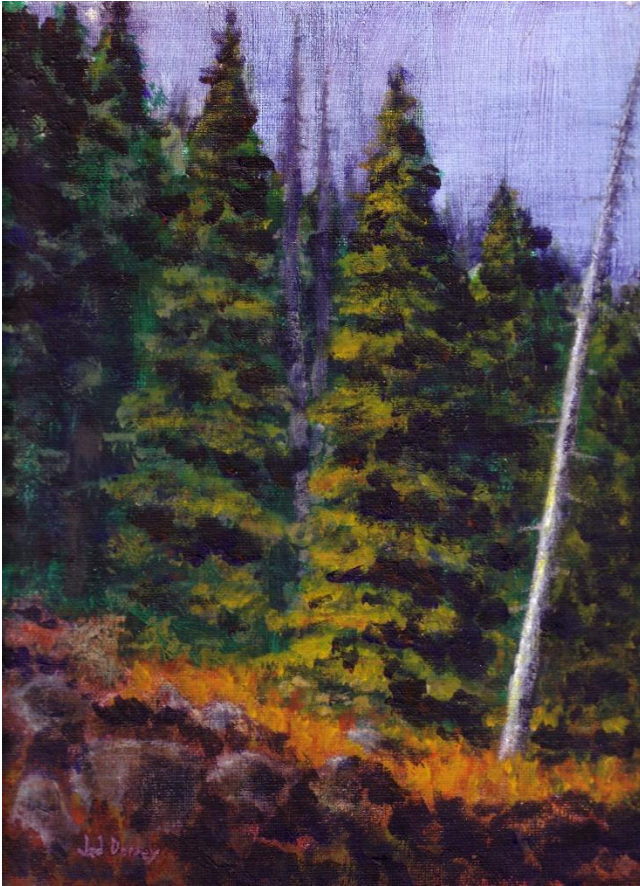
### **Coincidence?**

Then I got lucky. My mom bought me an art book for Christmas. As I was looking at the images and being awestruck at their beauty, I realized the artist was Mike Svob, one of the artists whose work I'd seen in that gallery in Whistler.

Then I looked at the back cover, and there happened to be an email address for him. I was so excited. I wrote him an email right away, and he told me he had a workshop coming up within a couple months. I still look back at his instruction and am thankful. Even though he was working in oils, he helped me wrap my head around how to



approach painting in a completely different way than watercolors, and that was enough to start me down my path enthusiastically.



One of the two paintings I worked on that first week in Whistler. The other one probably got burned :-)

### **What Makes Great Instruction**

I can't really stress enough how important finding great instruction is. I've learned so many incredible things from each of the artists I've studied under. I've been a little picky about whom I learn from, and I'd recommend that for you, too. The reason for this is because not all artists are good instructors. And not all instructors are good artists. When a good artist is also a good instructor, that is when you will get great instruction.

### **Two Qualities**

So, how do you find a great instructor? First, look for someone whose art you admire. That's kind of obvious, but it only makes sense to learn from someone when you like what they are doing, right? It doesn't mean that you want to paint exactly like the



artist. It might just be one aspect of their work that you want to learn, like the way they use color or their bold brush work. Find someone whose work you admire and would want to emulate. You can ask, “Does this artist’s work inspire me?” If the answer is yes, see if you can take a workshop, class, or online lessons from them.

The second part of the equation (Is this artist good at teaching?) can be more difficult to know right away, but it’s usually worth finding out if you can. You might find some reviews online, but if you can talk to someone who has been to a workshop, that is best.



Me teaching at my very first workshop

### **It Could Really Be Worth Your Effort**

You can get a pretty good idea from a little investigation, and it could save you some time and money. I have an artist friend who drove 1500 miles and paid \$700 to take a five-day workshop from a well-known artist, only to leave after two days because he was so disappointed and frustrated with the instruction of the workshop. That’s not the norm thankfully. Most artists who teach do so because they like it, which usually

means they are pretty good at it. But still, it's worth asking around or looking online if you have the chance.

When you do find an instructor you like, here are some more ideas to help you get the most out of the experience:

- **Share Goals:** Be thoughtful about what your goals are and let your instructor know what direction you want your work to go. Ensure they understand what your passions are and what you hope to improve upon or how you view your own work. This will allow them to focus on what matters to you and help you become more successful.
- **Listen First:** When you receive constructive criticism, it's important to listen carefully. Don't interrupt to explain why you did something or to justify your areas of weakness. Start out by listening. Take notes. Be gracious. Remember not to take criticism of your work personally and to see it as a chance to view your work through someone else's eyes. Be appreciative of the time they spend helping you.
- **Try Everything:** My rule of thumb when I'm taking a workshop is to forget that I know anything about painting and absorb everything the teacher says. In the long run, not everything an instructor says will be worth making a major change, but I always advise trying your best to adopt the principles and practices you're given. Don't dismiss them or think they don't apply. Oftentimes, following your instructor's directions will push you out of your comfort zone, but that is how you will grow. Over time, a lot will be forgotten or left behind anyway as you develop your own style or go back to original methods. But if you don't apply what you're being taught, why take the class?



- **Be Curious:** Your instructor provides you with a chance to learn, so ask questions! Your questions can be about things other than the painting process. An instructor may have technical advice for you about the tools you're using or the quality of the materials. Most artists have gone through years of experimenting before they find which canvas, pallet knife, or brand of paint works best for them. Find out about that stuff. If you want to sell your work, ask them about how they work with galleries. Perhaps you'd like to know how they travel with their painting supplies. Just remember, there is no dumb question, and if you are wondering something, there are probably others who have the same question.
- **Branch Out:** Don't think you need to find only one teacher. It takes a whole array of wisdom to gain the kind of education you need to really grow as a painter. Every new set of experienced eyes will have different advice to offer, each with its own value. As you grow, you'll discover new people to help you along your artistic journey, and that is a good thing.

## **The Greatest Of The Arts**

Great instruction will help you move forward with confidence because a good teacher will give you a track on which to run. You will still need to run, but you will have the assurance you are heading in the right direction.

***“I have come to believe that a great teacher is a great artist and that there are as few as there are any other great artists. Teaching might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit.”***

**- John Steinbeck**



## Strategy 7: Challenge Your Unbelief



***“If people knew how hard I worked to get my mastery,  
it wouldn’t seem so wonderful at all.”***

**- Michelangelo**

***“I’m not telling you it’s going to be easy - I’m telling you it’s going to be worth  
it.”***

**- Art Williams**

### **I Didn’t Think I Could Ever Do It**

I was in my first ever art workshop, and I was watching my instructor with awe. Everything seemed so effortless to him. He mixed the exact right color and put it down in exactly the right spot. Every time. At least that’s what it seemed like. Watching his paintings develop during the demonstrations left me feeling both inspired and deflated. I wanted to paint like him, but things didn’t translate for me easily. I couldn’t figure out how to mix the right color or put my brushstrokes down in exactly the right spot. The temptation to give up was real.

I was suffering from comparison syndrome. If you've ever taken a workshop, you've probably had a similar experience. Your instructor's paintings dazzled while yours fizzled. You may have even compared your work to the students around you and thought, "I'm just not artistic. It's not my gift."

### **Where'd That Thought Come From?**

Okay. This is the time to challenge that thinking because it's faulty. Could there be an artistic gene? Who knows? And how do you know you don't have it? What is more certain is that I've never met a highly skilled artist who hasn't had to dedicate themselves to learning and growing in their craft. That's true of all things, not just art. Consider a professional musician, athlete, or physician. They all have worked hard to get where they are. One of our doctor friends put it in perspective when, after counting all his years of schooling, he said he'd been through "27<sup>th</sup> Grade."

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**As Richard Schmidt said, "Give yourself the benefit of the doubt. Have confidence in the abilities that you already have."**

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### **The Benefit of The Doubt**

What's the point? Never believe you don't have "the gift." As Richard Schmidt said, "...give yourself the benefit of the doubt. Have confidence in the abilities that you already do have." Nobody started out as a professional. All those people we look up to have practiced and worked hard to get where they are. They've learned from people who know more than them, and they've put in the time and energy to grow. They have had to move past their own doubts because they didn't start out as masters.

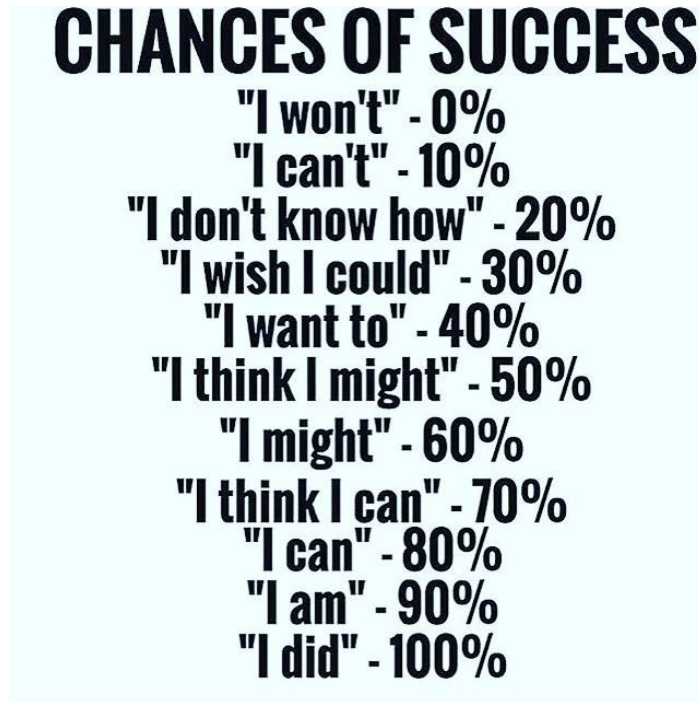
### **Staying Focused**

Becoming confident in your skills means working hard to acquire a high level of expertise and then owning it. It means becoming mentally durable. It also requires a commitment to a vision for your future that is grounded in the reality of where you are now. Did you show your work in a gallery and not one piece sold? That doesn't mean your work isn't good. It just means it wasn't what buyers were looking for or didn't get

the publicity it needed. Don't allow yourself to think negatively when something doesn't go your way. Stay focused on the next goal for improvement and learn from challenging experiences. Obstacles will help you grow if you change the way you think about them.

### **Where Are Your Thoughts?**

I saw this image earlier today, and it applies to what we are talking about:



Our mindset is vital to our work, especially when we are engaging in something creative because it feels like we are putting our souls into it. We feel connected to our artwork. That's why Henry Matisse said it takes courage. We will always do better work in a good frame of mind, so we need to fight against negative thoughts. The problem is that often we don't even know we are limiting ourselves. To start, you need to examine what you really think you're capable of. What do you dream of? It doesn't have to be limited to art either. But when you see an accomplished artist, can you imagine yourself in their shoes? How does it feel? Is it hard to imagine?

### **Obstacle or Opportunity?**

Each of us will have our own limiting thoughts to deal with. We will have our own obstacles. So, what are your limiting thoughts? How are you fighting them? How do



you *know* you can't \_\_\_\_\_? What's the obstacle in your way? Have you given up already because of it? Or are you determined to find a way?

Again, I don't believe that everything will magically happen if you just think the right thoughts. But what's the alternative? Will you accomplish your goals if you *don't* think you can? No, because if we don't believe we can succeed, we won't give our full effort because we've already determined we will fail. At the same time, sometimes if we have a big goal, it can feel overwhelming because there is so far to go. So, how do we keep a good perspective?



### **One Mile x 100**

I remember a story of a bad snowstorm in Alaska that left a man stranded 100 miles from the nearest outpost. The people at the outpost knew he was stranded, but they were helpless to do anything and counted him as dead. They knew no one would be able to walk 100 miles under those conditions. They were dumbfounded when, after several days, they heard something outside and found the stranded man had fainted on the back stairs. After he was revived and given something to eat, they asked him what everyone was dying to know, “How did you walk 100 miles in this deadly snowstorm?”



His answer: “I didn’t walk 100 miles. I walked one mile 100 times.”

If it’s too hard to believe you will achieve your biggest goal, how about turning it into 100 smaller goals? Every time you achieve one of the smaller goals, you will gain confidence.

### **A Personal Obstacle**

A few years ago, my wife and I were in debt. We had miscalculated some taxes (my fault) and owed the IRS a bunch of money, plus we had a few other debts. Even though it wasn’t an overwhelming amount of money, it still felt that way. We were managing it but not getting out of debt. Then we took a course from Dave Ramsey through Financial Peace University, and it made a huge difference. But the advice that helped us the most was counterintuitive for me.



### **The Snowball Effect**

He said to pay off the smallest debt first. I usually like to tackle the biggest thing first. But the reason was all about momentum. (Imagine a snowball rolling down a hill picking up more and more snow.) He said if you knocked off the smallest debt, then you could concentrate on the next smallest debt. You could take the money you would have normally paid on the first debt and add it to what you were paying on the second debt. That would double your efforts and you might make some savings in interest, but the most important part he said is that you would *feel*/like you had made progress. That feeling of progress would help motivate you to keep going, and as you knocked off each debt, you would be able to throw more money at the next debt in line. And it worked. In less than a year, we had gotten rid of those debts.

### **Getting Practical**

So, what's a goal you have in art? Are there other areas of life you'd like to achieve things? What would the path look like for you to achieve your goal? Make sure you aren't the one limiting yourself or thinking you never could make it because the goal is big. Work on breaking down your goal into smaller goals and actionable steps. Maybe you'd like to gain more training, but you can't afford it. Well, what are some smaller goals that can help you get there? Perhaps your first goal should be to look for all the grants or scholarships that you could apply for. Your second goal could be to apply for the top five. Your third goal could be the next five. The big goals and little goals will look different for each of us. If your goal is to make a living as an artist, perhaps the first goal is to sell one painting or teach one person how to paint. Remember the snowball. Each time you meet a goal, you gain momentum.



### **I Believe In You**

For every aspiration, there's a path to success. Some paths are longer, but if you're willing to work for it, you can achieve great things. Keep your eye out for opportunities and become the champion of your own artistic success. Visualize where you'd like to see yourself as an artist and start working toward getting yourself there. Quite often it's a matter of instruction, hard work, and networking; all of which are within your reach. Articulate your dream. Set small goals along the way. Celebrate each victory. Keep going. You have what it takes. I believe in you. Now you believe in yourself, too.

***“You are an unfinished work in progress. One of the good things about life’s challenges: you get to find out that you’re capable of being far more than you ever thought possible.”***

**- Karen Salmonsohn**

## Strategy 8: Embrace Failure



*“One must spoil as many canvases as one succeeds with.”*

–Vincent van Gogh

### He Was Struggling, And I Could Tell

I was watching an instructional video by a famous landscape painter, and something was wrong. It wasn't that the painting didn't look amazing (to me). I thought it was fantastic. But I could tell by his mannerisms and words that he was not happy with the sky. He kept going back to it, changing the shapes of certain clouds, adding lighter values, and taking them away. He would move to another part of the painting and work for a while, but he'd always come back to that one area of the sky. He just couldn't get it right. I wondered how he would resolve the problem at hand.

### What?!

Then, suddenly, the screen faded to black. When the video came back, the artist was working again on the painting and talking. I looked closer at the sky. It was different! Something had changed since the screen faded to black. I realized the artist was wearing a different shirt. It was clear that time had passed. I was disappointed because I had wanted to see how the sky dilemma would be solved. My feelings, however, were about to change, and I would learn something important.



## The Moment I Won't Forget

After doing a little bit of painting here and there, the artist turned and faced the camera. What he said has stuck with me for years. It was something like this:

*"You probably noticed that I was struggling with this painting. I was, and I didn't know exactly how to fix it. It's been two weeks since then. As you can see, I finally figured out how I could move forward, and I did some work off camera that solved my issue with the sky.*

*But what I want to talk to you about today is failure. You see, painting has not gotten easier for me over the years. It's gotten harder. When I was young, I was free because I didn't know anything. But now my expectations are higher. I deal with the fear of failure more than ever.*

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**"If we aren't failing we aren't growing."**

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*But I heard a quote the other day that has helped me a lot: 'If we aren't failing, we aren't growing.' That has helped me look at it all differently.*

*See, we don't need to be afraid of failure. Instead, we need to change our thinking completely. We need to embrace failure. It is a measure of progress. If we aren't failing, it means we are stagnant and not growing at all. If we are failing, it means we are moving forward. We are growing."*

## Greater Respect

Those words hit me and stuck with me. I appreciated how he addressed such a big issue we all deal with, especially when it would have been easy to gloss over it and act like that painting had never been a struggle. It gave me an even bigger amount of respect for the man who said them. It was Scott Christenson, one of the world's premiere landscape painters.



The amazing Scott Christenson demonstrating in a workshop.

### **Embracing Failure Is Countercultural**

But does our society embrace failure like that? I'd say not. Our daily lives are immersed in the effects of an online world where most often successes are shared and failures are hidden. On Instagram and Facebook, we see the college graduation, the good hair day, the blossoming relationship, and the perfect family on vacation.

### **The Art World Is No Different**

Rarely does someone post their painting failure or the time their easel collapsed during a demonstration. Nobody touts the number of paintings they *haven't* sold or what juried art shows they didn't make the cut for. Everyone has at least one painting they've been working on for years, and it just doesn't seem to come together. Then there are gallery rejections and shows where nothing sells. While all of this may sound bleak, everyone has their share of it. **EVERYONE.**

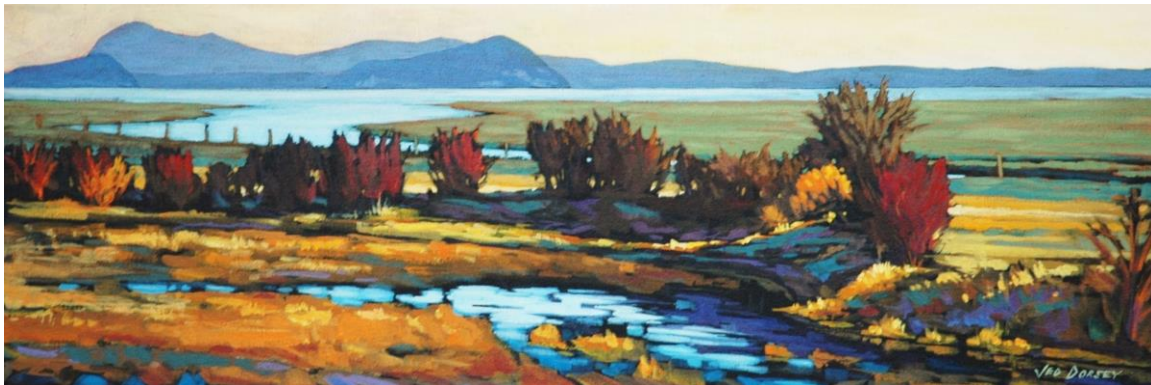
If you're a budding artist, it may feel even worse. You have four paintings after months of work, and every painting you create might look to you like an epic fail. The values are off. The proportions are skewed. You might not even know what's wrong with

them. Or maybe you tried to experiment in a painting, and everyone kept asking, “What is it?”

### **Success Takes Failure (What?!)**

Success takes time. It takes effort. It takes a gradual evolution of your artistic mind. But perhaps most important for us to learn, *success takes failure*. Failure is part of becoming better, learning what we are already good at and what we can improve upon.

According to Nigel Barber Ph.D., “With success, people keep on doing the same thing. When they fail, they are forced to adapt and change.” Barber’s article in February 2013’s *Psychology Today* credits artists with a unique set of skills that benefit from the frustration of failure: “When one combines emotionalism with originality, that is fairly close to what most people think of as artistic creativity. Artists are not necessarily frustrated people but tend to be dissatisfied with what they have accomplished previously and try to do something better, or something new.” This dissatisfaction if controlled and focused turns failure into learning. It allows the mind to capture the specifics of the failure and improve.



An early painting of mine I really struggled with, but which became better because of the struggle and “mistakes”.

### **Transforming Mistakes**

I remember a time my sister, a watercolor artist, was working on an important piece for a show. After some time, she accidentally spilled water and paint on her paper, staining a large portion of it. Almost ready to give up, she just prayed and hoped that perhaps there was a bigger purpose to her accident, and she kept working. That painting ended up being one of her favorite works, winning an award and selling immediately at its first showing. Part of the magic of that painting was what had happened in the spilled water mistake.

## **Embrace Your Growth**

So, whatever it looks like, failure can be a portal to new ways of thinking. It can propel you to push your personal limits of discovery. It can change your direction. Failure means you are growing. Embrace it.

***“Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.”***

**- Scott Adams**

***“An artist cannot fail; it is a success to be one.”***

**- Charles Horton Cooley**

Sources: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-human-beast/201302/the-benefits-failure>, August 14, 2019



## Strategy 9: Take Risks



***“I’ve been absolutely terrified every moment of my life – and I’ve never let it keep me from doing a single thing I wanted to do.”***

**—Georgia O’Keeffe**

### **It Changed My Life**

My sister had coached me, but I was still so nervous. The phone trembled in my hand.

“Hi, this is Jed Dorsey here... {insert a minute of small talk, and then finally} ...I was just wondering, is Renae there?”

### **I Needed Help**

I had met this gorgeous young woman over a week before, but because of my fear, I hadn’t done anything to follow up with her. Until that afternoon. My sister had questioned my inaction. She had told me I couldn’t let something good just walk away. Then she’d even coached me on how to call and talk to the family when I was hoping to reach Renae.

And now I was on the phone, trying to ask my dream girl on a date. I was taking the risk. I was showing I was interested. I was making rejection possible. *Risk always involves the possibility of failure.*

## **Again & Again**

Weeks later, I risked again when I played Renae the song I had written for her. Would she laugh at me, or would she love it? Months later, I risked when I asked her to marry me. Then our separate lives turned to we, and we kept on risking. We risked when we told the truth about being married when crossing the border (I'll have to tell you that story another time.). We risked when we started our business in Vancouver, BC, as a newly married couple. We risked when we left all our friends and life in Vancouver to search for new opportunities to grow. We risked when we opened our home to fifty at-risk high school kids every week for four years. We risked when we made the leap to full-time art.



Renae & me a month after we were married celebrating Canadian Thanksgiving at her parents' house.

## **Risk Is Part of Life**

We all take risks, don't we? You risked when you started reading this. Will it be worth your time? Some risks seem small. Some seem big. It's not too big of a risk to sing in the shower, but to audition for the lead role in a musical would terrify most of us. But

why is taking risks so important for our growth as artists, especially when it comes to confidence?

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**We must take risks and grow, or we are choosing to let our fears control us and stop us from becoming who we are made to be.**

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### **What's the Cost of Not Risking?**

We can start by thinking about the opposite of taking a risk, or playing it safe. The problem with playing it safe is that we never leave our comfort zone. We never do anything that is hard or beyond what we've succeeded at before. Truthfully, it is impossible to completely play it safe. In leaving the womb at birth, we are forced out of our comfort zone and enter a world with challenges, danger, and risk.

### **Getting Past Fear**

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that taking risks is always the right thing to do. We need to employ wisdom in our decisions. But when it comes to art, we absolutely need to move past our fear of failure. We *must* take risks and grow, or we are choosing to let our fears control us and stop us from becoming who we are made to be. Without risk-taking, we are stuck. Apathy and fear are the great enemies of creative courage.

### **One Step at a Time**

In the last chapter we learned that *failure is necessary for growth*. In fact, failure is proof you are growing. Now we need to act on that knowledge. Intellectually embracing failure is the first step, but if we leave it at that, nothing changes. The next logical step is to take a risk. It could be as simple as bringing out a new canvas and starting to paint again if you've been paralyzed with fear and inactive. Or it could be stepping out into the unknown and trying something new. At first, this will feel uncomfortable. But each time you take a step, you will get a little more sure-footed. Your confidence will be built with each stride forward. When you falter, you will learn from it, and you will have another tool in your tool belt for the next time you encounter that creative dilemma.



## A New Focus on Growth

As you move forward, confidence in your own abilities will flourish. You'll find you can take more and more risks in your work and not focus on the failures. So, don't let fear of the unknown hold you back. To reach your potential, you need to take some risks to become better.



## We're All Different

For each of us, taking a risk might look different. For some of us, it might feel risky to follow a teacher's advice (or my advice, for that matter!). For others, it might be a risk to *not* follow a teacher's advice. Maybe you will *experiment* with a painting exercise rather than doing it *exactly* like your instructor did it or prescribed. It will usually mean trying something new. Or maybe trying something again that you failed at before. But now, you are ready to risk again because failure is a marker on the path to success. Here are some ideas of new things you might venture out and try:

- **Paint in public or invite friends to a demonstration.** It takes confidence to set up your easel and begin painting with all the world watching. Don't worry if your painting isn't a masterpiece. People enjoy watching your process and talking about technique.



- **Teach a class to beginners.** People will be amazed at your talent, and you'll realize how much you really do know. Invite friends for a sip-and-paint or sign up to teach at your local community center.
- **Try a medium you've always wanted to try.** If you've always used oil or acrylic paint, try watercolor, egg tempura, or gouache. Don't be afraid to experiment. You might discover a new love.
- **Take a drawing class focusing on the human figure.** Good drawing skills are crucial to painting, and figure drawing is a wonderful way to grow in that.
- **Join an art community and make new friends.** You'll be surprised how many forms of art you didn't even know existed. Get to know other artists and learn their techniques.



- **Enter your artwork in a group show.** See how it feels to have your work on display and soak up the positive feedback.
- **If you've never tried plein air painting, get out into the world and give it a whirl.** Hike out to a beach and set up on the sand. Or if physical limitations hinder you, set up a table or small space on your back deck. Painting outdoors is exhilarating.

- **Sign up for a painting class in your local community or an online painting course.** Don't keep doing the same thing over and over; learn something new and see how other people are doing it.
- **Try new subject matter.** Maybe you've always painted landscapes or still life. Try doing a portrait. Consider how the techniques you use for one style might be infused into your new subject matter. You will add breadth to your artistic experience that will impact all you do.
- **Reinvent yourself as an artist.** If you're a potter, try painting. If you're a painter, try sculpture. Every experience shapes you and builds on who you already are.

Personally, I am so thankful I took the risk to call Renae that day so long ago. It changed my life, and I can't imagine who I'd be without her. I'm thankful for all the times I faced my fears and moved forward with courage. I've had a lot of failures to go along with any victories. But these are the experiences that slowly have shaped me and helped me know a little more of who I am and who I can be.

Your life will also change as you take risks. You will grow and flourish as a confident, courageous artist – but better still – as a confident and courageous person.

***“Stay firmly in your path and dare; be wild two hours a day.”***

**- Paul Gauguin**

## Strategy 10: Love Much



*“Love many things, for therein lies the true strength, and whosoever loves much performs much, and can accomplish much, and what is done in love is done well.”*

- Vincent Van Gogh

### Jumping On The Trampoline

Our daughter is seven, and when she gets home from school, whenever I can, I run out of our house straight to her. She drops her backpack and sprints away from me into the backyard. It's her delight to have me chase her around the side of the house. Once in the backyard, she always wants to jump on our trampoline. No matter how tired I am or what I'm working on, I take that time to jump with her. We play silly games and laugh a lot.

### A Different Motivation

I do my best to take the time to play with our daughter because I love her. My motivation is not what I get out of it even though I *do* enjoy my time with her because it helps me remember what it's like to be young. My main motivation is that *she* loves jumping on the trampoline. And because she loves it and I love her, I get up there and act like I'm more youthful than I probably should.

Love changes everything. It rewrites the story. It builds an upside-down kingdom. Love gives courage and fosters perseverance. It ignites passion and fuels creativity. But love does something else that is extraordinary. We've been talking about confidence, right?

Well, love will do something more amazing than give you loads of confidence. It will make confidence *irrelevant* because it moves *you* from the center of the conversation.

### **A Different Viewpoint**

Confidence has to do with your own view of yourself, right? It is “belief in oneself and one's powers or abilities; self-confidence.” But *love* has to do with delight in something outside of yourself. Instead of an inward focus, love gives you an outward perspective. This works in three ways.



### **Choose What You Love**

First, love can help you choose what to create. I remember when I was early in my art career and trying to figure out how to make a living, the temptation was strong for me to paint what I thought other people would want to buy. Thankfully, when I was struggling through all that in my mind, I had a conversation with an amazing artist friend named Barb Knuckles. I remember the conversation vividly, and what was impressed on me the most was that I needed to paint *what I loved*. That might be so obvious to you, but for whatever reason, my brain hadn't reached that conclusion yet.



It finally clicked for me at that moment. When we paint what we love, it will be apparent in our work.

My mom is an amazing artist, and she especially excels at painting people. Usually little people, like kids. And do you know how she has become so good at painting people? Because when she was looking for what she would paint years ago, she let her heart lead her. She loved her children and grandchildren, so she painted them. She has always painted what she has loved, and it shows in her work. There is passion, emotion, and love.



A commission my mom, Ann Cory Dorsey, did of a friend's granddaughter at the beach. You can see more of her work at [www.anncoryart.com](http://www.anncoryart.com)

When we paint what we love, our emotions and passion will more easily be seen and experienced by the viewer. The ironic thing is that by imagining what someone else would want and paint for a sale, we make our work less attractive. And we will burn out quicker. So, paint what you love.

### Who's It For?

Second, love will let you be happy imagining someone else's joy. Recently, I was hired to complete a custom painting for a friend whom I've gotten to know over the past year or so. The painting was going to be of her and her siblings playing at the beach when they were children. The difficulty was that I had to make the whole scene up. I had one generic reference photo of the kids at a photo shoot, and that only showed me how big the five siblings were in relation to each other. Everything in the scene was up to me to imagine and design. While there were some challenges to this painting, I had a really good time working on it. And the reason was this: I wasn't thinking about myself. I was thinking about how happy it would make my friend to have that special painting. I learned about her family of origin during the process. I heard why the artwork would mean so much and even possibly bring healing to some old hurts. I was commissioned to create something special and significant and even redemptive. So, when I encountered something difficult in the painting process, all I had to do was think about how much it would mean for her and her siblings to have it.



The scene I came up with, including a butterfly which had special significance for the family.

So, here's a question you can ask. Who am I painting this for? You will find some extra motivation and joy when you can imagine someone else's delight in receiving your

painting whether as a purchase or a gift. You may not even have known who the person was going to be while you were painting – that’s why I said imagine. There have been times in my career when someone has reacted so strongly to a painting that I’ve given it to them. I knew they didn’t have the money to afford it, but I saw an emotional connection that was extraordinary. I figured that was because I’d painted it for them – I just hadn’t known it beforehand. And while they have always been overjoyed to receive the gift, I think I have been the person who gets the most out of it. But it’s not just good for the recipient. I enjoy it immensely, and honestly, it probably feels better than selling a painting to me although selling paintings is fun, too! It reminds me of the ancient words of Jesus, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”



### **Persevering Power When It’s Hard**

Third, love gives your work meaning. A month ago, I was completely bogged down in work. I had two major art exhibitions I was painting for, and we were switching Acrylic University over to a new platform. I was also taking a business course that was demanding. Plus, we had all the normal things like classes, our studio, and a family. I remember feeling overwhelmed. So, what did I do? I went into my computer and printed out photographs of people I love. There was, of course, my wife and daughter. But there were also art students, young people I used to work with, plus some children

at my daughter's old school and a couple artist friends. I took those photos and put them right above my workspace so I would see them daily. They were my motivation. I needed to remember why I was working so hard. I needed to remember that it was for others' good. Only when love compels us forward will we have the perseverance we need for the challenging journey ahead.

How does this relate to confidence, though? Well, for me, there are parts of what I do that aren't natural for me. I don't naturally put myself out there all the time. I don't write books naturally. I don't post my paintings to social media naturally. Sometimes I don't always feel like doing these things. I also don't always (Don't let this shock you!) want to paint. I get tired like anyone else. I feel burned out sometimes. I run out of creative energy and ideas. Besides getting rest, which I totally believe in, the main thing that helps me keep running forward and pushing myself to do things that are uncomfortable is love for the people who are represented by those photos. In fact, you are represented there. I am writing this right now to encourage you. I want you to be the best artist and person you can be.

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**“Being half-hearted will not change  
your life.”**

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I truly believe that our lives are interconnected, and as you grow in your creative courage, you will also grow in other areas of life. You will affect the world for good. You will pass on the encouragement to someone else. You will push past insecurities for the good of others. Someone else will find strength because of your life.

### **In Conclusion**

Being half-hearted will not change your life. It won't change anyone else's life either. Neither will a focus on yourself. Being self-focused won't give you great courage. It might make you arrogant, but it won't lead you into the greatness of who you could be if you lived a life of love.

Growing in freedom and confidence as a painter is all within your reach. Think positively. Have goals and engage in a painting practice. Analyze your work constructively. Don't be afraid to copy a master. Find your people. Get yourself a mentor or teacher. Challenge your beliefs about your abilities. Give yourself



permission to fail. Take risks with your art. And do everything with love. Joyful freedom is contagious. You have the power to help someone else along their path to success.

You have much to offer, so be you. Boldly.

***“Everyone has inside them a piece of good news. The good news is you don’t know how great you can be! How much you can love! What you can accomplish! And what your potential is.”***

**– Anne Frank**



This picture is kind of embarrassing, but I’m including it because it shows me enthusiastically posing for a photo... and you know what, sometimes you just need to let down your guard and be yourself. This is really me. I’m a goofball, and I’m whole-hearted in what I do. I hope it encourages you also to be yourself, whole-heartedly.

## My Family of Artists – Just For Fun!



My family of artists. Back row from left: my brother Jeff, my brother Jason, my sister April, & me. In front are my parents, Jack & Ann. I've been fortunate to have such a wonderful family, and I consider it my duty to pass on the blessings I've been given through them.

**Jeff** is quite an artist, but he currently doesn't have a website I could link.

**Jason** is a watercolor artist and runs Sunnyshore Studio: <https://www.sunnyshorestudio.com>

**April** is the most talented in the family and also a full-time mom. She doesn't have a website, but occasionally I collaborate on pieces with her and they are always on my site when finished.

**Jed** - I have two main art websites.

My personal site is: <https://www.jeddorseyart.com>

and my instructional website is: <https://www.acrylicuniversity.com>

**Jack** - My dad's website: <https://www.jackdorseyart.com>

**Ann** - My mom's website: <https://www.anncoryart.com>

**F.Y. Cory** – You can learn more about my great-grandmother here: <https://fycory.com/>

The Artist's Guide To Create With Freedom

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