



# Your Creative Backpack

Packing Tips for Artful Adventures

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for Artful Adventures

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Art: The stuff you make.

Artful Adventure: The process of making your stuff.

Artist: The maker of the stuff.  
(That would be you.)

Even though...

You may be uncomfortable calling yourself an Artist. I understand.

The word is fraught.

I've thought about this a lot. And here's what I've concluded. It doesn't matter what you call yourself. Or what others call you. What matters is the work. And because the work can get derailed by the tiniest thing, it makes sense that a book that's supposed to be about helping you get your stuff made ought to use words that don't cause you to put up a wall of resistance right from the start.

That's why I'm not going to call you an Artist (even though that's what you are). I'm going to call you an Adventurer.

Sometimes I'll call you an Artful Adventurer.

It's a few more syllables, but it's a lot less fraught.

Yes, it's a wee bit clunky compared to that other word, but who doesn't feel a little clunky at times, when they're working on their art? I often have moments,

sometimes long moments, especially at the start, when I don't know where I'm going (clunk-clunk), or how I'm going to get from here to there (clunk). There are also moments when I'm so far from the beginning and no closer to the end, when clunky is the only word that can describe my process.

So there you go. Clunky can be comforting. Let it be.

And just so we're clear, the goal of this little book isn't to get you to call yourself an artist.

The goal of this book is to help you get your stuff made.

What you choose to call yourself is up to you.

Now: here's a question for you:

Have you ever had a creative project go off the rails?

Maybe it was a book that didn't get past its rough draft, or a painting that didn't get beyond its ugly stage. Maybe it was a cd that never got finished, or never got started. Maybe it was a creative business venture that died of neglect.

Every Artful Adventurer has stillborn work. Every one of us has abandoned a project before it was finished. Every one of us has talked ourselves out of starting something that should have been started.

And yet the desire persists. The urge to make our stuff is...urgent. And it keeps coming around. When we resist it, when we let ourselves drift, when we hesitate, when we postpone, wait for better circumstances, more money, a more favorable alignment of the planets and stars, we can find ourselves making nothing at all for a very long time. This is not good. It makes us restless and twitchy and terrible to be around.

Thankfully — for ourselves and for the sake of those around us — art is insistent. It keeps tapping us on the shoulder, asking us to be (at least a little, at least sometimes) impetuous. Asking us to go Now.

And because we're Artful Adventurers, we (usually, frequently, more times than not) get up off the couch and go. We shove our resistance aside and get to work. We throw ourselves into a fresh project, with a full head of steam, an impassioned heart, and a soul full of inspiration.

It feels good. It feels right. We're so happy to making our stuff once more.

And then... we stop.

We get a few hours or days or weeks into our adventure, and we're overcome by doubt, beset by fear, convinced we're not up to the task, or that the task is unworthy of our effort. And we set aside the brush, the pen, the instrument. We

toss the work in the bin, or tuck it behind the dresser, and we go back to the couch where we wait for the urgency to come around again.

This is no way to get our stuff made. So why do we do it?

Why do we stop?

And how can we stop stopping?

I have a theory.

It goes something like this.

Our art wants to be made. The urge is urgent, remember? But achieving liftoff requires a lot of energy if we're going to overcome our resistance to getting up off the couch. So we put a lot of energy into our liftoff. By this I mean we (frequently?) fly out the door in pursuit of our artful desires without giving much thought to the full arc of our creative process. We just know we have to start.

And, yes, starting is crucial.

Absolutely.

But a sustained creative effort needs something more than a terrific start.

A sustained effort needs something to keep it running when the creative inspiration flags, something to keep the wheels on the cart and the cart on the track throughout that full arc of our creative process, from ignition and liftoff to re-entry and splashdown.

A sustained creative effort needs something to remind us that we know how to keep going when resistance and all its burdensome weight threatens to drag our art to a halt.

Something like... a toolkit.

Or what I call a Creative Backpack.

A Creative Backpack contains the tools and tactics that support our creative work from inspiration to realization. It's easy to carry, light as a thought, and it holds only what will help, nothing that will hinder.

Can we make our art without carrying a Creative Backpack?

Sure.

But why would we want to?

Without a Creative Backpack, we're left to the whim of circumstance and the vagaries of our own (sometimes wavering) determination.

Without a Creative Backpack we're at the mercy of the weather – the storms that keep us from venturing out, the drought that desiccates our artful spirit.

Without a Creative Backpack, we risk learning only too late that a pair of rubber rain boots and a good pocket knife can mean the difference between a successful adventure and one in which we curse the weather and can't even sharpen our pencil.

Mixed-metaphorically speaking, you understand.

Your Creative Backpack contains the sort of rubber boots and pocket knives you need to keep your artful perspective fresh and your imaginative socks dry. It's the container for your artful intention, and it's the place where doubt and misgivings have been brought to heel and fear has been corralled.

Packing a Creative Backpack prepares you for the more onerous obstacles that tend to show up mid-way through your creative endeavors. Things like...

Resistance.

Loss of focus.

Disillusionment.

All in all, it's a pretty useful thing to set by the door, where it's ready and waiting for those times when the creative spirit taps you on the shoulder and says, "Go now! Go!"

So where do we get this amazing pack? And how do we fill it?

I'm so glad you asked.

Packing Tip #1:  
Start With What You Have

First things first: Don't rush out and buy a brand new backpack. The one you've been carrying around since you were a kid will do just fine. It's familiar and it fits.

You say you don't have a backpack?

Okay, let's start over. This is a metaphorical backpack. Sometimes referred to as baggage. It's full of your stuff. We've all got stuff, so we've all got a backpack.

Are you with me now? Good.

Now, dump it out.

Yes, yes, right there on the floor. Or the bed.

And don't panic. Nobody here is going to look at your stuff. No one will ask you to examine it a piece at a time to figure out how it contributed to your current state. Your stuff is private.

Yes, even that mess you made of your first or third or fifth novel, and all those drawings stuffed into the bottom drawer of your desk, and the notebooks full of poems you've never shown anyone. Private. As are all the recriminating things you've told yourself about your art and your work over the years, all those grimy thoughts that tumbled out, covered with bits of fallen leaves and sticky ink from that leaky pen you can't bring yourself to throw away.

All of it.

Private.

Understand: This dumping process isn't about invading your space.

It's about creating space.

It's about clearing space.

It's about making room.

So here's what you do.

Gather up all that private stuff you dumped out of your backpack, put it into a pillowcase or a box or something, and shove it into a closet.

Yes.

Just... put it away. Get it out of sight. And leave it there. Dealing with your stuff is the subject for another day. Today we're dealing with your art.

I'll bet you feel a little lighter already.

Okay, then.

Your backpack is empty.

We're ready to move on.

Packing Tip #2:

Wash Your Pack Before You Refill It.

Dumping all that old stuff out was a good first step, but before you put fresh new stuff into your pack, you're going to want to give it a thorough cleaning.

The interior is still a little dodgy, after all, what with all those crumbs of half-finished projects and the lingering odors of disappointment and jealousy and whatever else has come between you and your art over the years.

So once your pack is empty, it's time to toss it into the washing machine.

And if you don't have a washing machine, that's okay. Like the backpack, the washing machine is a metaphor, too.

Don't you wish all your laundry was this easy?

By the way, you might want to turn your pack inside-out when you put it in the machine, so all those stale, clingy bits from deep down inside get washed away. You don't want them getting their grime and stickiness all over your awesome new adventure, do you?

I didn't think so.

Now add some eco-friendly laundry powder to the mix, something that won't irritate your skin and rinses away thoroughly. We don't want fake perfumes or chalky residue to coat our Artful Adventure.

We want a naturally fresh artful experience.

And be sure to set the machine on a gentle cycle. There's no need to batter your backpack with overzealous agitation. You want it clean, not ravaged.

Packing Tip #3:

Leave Out More Than You Put In

While your pack is in the wash, let's give some thought to the following two lists. One is short. The other is a little longer. We'll start with the longer one.

This is a list of things you don't need.

- A degree.
- A certificate of competence.
  - A stamp of approval.
- A permission slip signed by your mother.  
[Or your husband. Or your kids. Or your friends.]
  - Scads of money.
  - A new wardrobe.
- A bunch of expensive supplies.
  - More hours in the day.
  - More days in the week.

And now the shorter one. These are the things you'll want to bring along.

- Your open mind.
- Your open heart.
- Your open eyes.

It's good to travel light.

It's also good to carry along a willingness to be exactly where you are, no matter where that may be. A decent spyglass is nice to have, too. And if you make it a metaphorical spyglass, you'll be virtually weightless.

I think your machine is on its spin cycle. Wasn't that fast? When it stops you can toss your pack into your metaphorical dryer, add a little muslin bag filled with something that smells nice, and let it tumble for a while. As soon as it's dry, we can move on.

Is it dry? Lovely. Let's move on.

Packing Tip #4:  
About that Spyglass

Have you thought about those two lists, the things you need and the things you don't? If you haven't, you can think about them now.

I like the short list a lot.

Don't you?

In addition to thinking about the lists, you might want to consider where you might find that spyglass I mentioned.

You know: something you can use to see things from a different perspective, things that might be appearing on your artful horizon.

A good spyglass will help you to notice what's coming your way, and frame it, and provide clear focus for your attention. It will help you navigate toward your desired outcome.

So what makes a good spyglass?

A good spyglass is anything that lifts you out of your daily ordinary, and lets you see – and hear, and think about – things anew.

And you need one because Artful Adventure asks you to see things anew on a daily basis.

Consider: most of us recycle our thoughts day after day. They may be perfectly good thoughts, well-considered and intelligent thoughts. But they're familiar. You know their terrain, and your mind tends to glide across their surface without much ado.

When you're preparing for an Artful Adventure, you want a bit of ado. You want more than a surface glimpse. Which means you need to remember how to look deeper. Anything that lifts you out of your ordinary will help you do that.

So make it a point to do something different today.

Yes, today.

It can be as simple as switching out your music. Listen to something you don't ordinarily reach for. Or try moving yourself about differently. Walk when you usually drive. Bicycle if you usually walk. Take a different route. Shake up your daily routine, just a little. One time this week, make something unusual for dinner. Go bowling. Read a novel from 100 years ago. Move your furniture around. Have coffee instead of tea, or a green smoothie in place of your usual popart. Speak up if you're usually quiet. Be quiet if you're usually the talkative one.

Change something. Create frisson. And then pay attention to what happens when you do.

Notice what you notice.

And notice how you feel about noticing.

Frisson combined with curiosity makes a very good spyglass.

Packing tip #5:  
Make Room for Fear

I have fears. You have fears. We all have fears.

Every Artful Adventurer I've ever met has fears.

I fear I'll mess up, do something badly, embarrass myself. I fear I won't finish what I start, that I'll never be as good as so-and-so, that I have no talent. I fear I have nothing to say. I fear I'll be criticized. I fear I'll be ignored.

Here's what I've come to believe about fear:

It's part of the package.

Always and forever.

Fear is like that piece of curly purple kale that sits on your plate at the deli, taking up all the space between the two halves of your sandwich. It's not there to

be consumed (unless you choose to. And then you find out how bitter it is). No, the fear – like the kale – is there to enliven your senses.

And while fear may enliven your senses in ways you don't like, it has its reasons for doing what it does. Chief among them is the fact that you are a gentle spirit with a tender soul, and fear wants to make sure you don't get hurt.

That's right. You have a tender soul. And fear is here to protect it.

But... but... fear is an obstacle!

Fear gets in the way!

O yes, it is.  
And yes, it does.

So what do we do with our fear?

There are all sorts of awesome creative people who will tell you that you need to push past your fear, ignore it, dismiss it, rise above it, blast it to smithereens. And I'm all for doing what works. But the blasting and all that other stuff seem a little harsh to me, given that fear is only trying to protect us from harm.

I favor a gentler approach.

I believe in extending fear an invitation to come along.

Crazy, I know.

But consider. You can't really give fear the slip. Even the most seasoned Adventurer gets backstage nausea and sweats through openings. And if you're just starting out, especially if you've been avoiding your creative urgings for any length of time, fear is going to surface early and often.

Honestly, unless you want to be blasting and pushing the whole time, paying more attention to waging war against your fear than to making your art, you might as well claim your fear from the start, and give it a comfy place to hang out.

I recommend something like this:

"Hello, fears and misgivings! I'm going on an adventure, and I wouldn't dream of leaving you behind. I even emptied out my backpack, so there's lots of room for you and all your friends.

What do you say?"

See? Gentle.

And sly.

Here's why it's sly: You know the saying, "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer"? Well, fear isn't so much an enemy as it is a nemesis, but the logic still applies. Keep fear close, if only because it's going to dog your heels anyway. Not only that, but as counter-intuitive as it seems, fear is necessary.

Healthy fear is what keeps you from reaching into a hornet's nest, after all, or going for a swim in shark-infested waters. And the way to keep your fear healthy -- not manic or oversized -- is to acknowledge its reality. So keep it close, but keep it contained, and don't let it carry the map.

Also: don't put it in the nice, big, roomy compartment of your pack. If you do, two things will happen. One, it will stick like cockleburs to everything else you put in there. Two, it will be in the dark, and we all know how darkness feeds fear.

Instead, tuck it into the handy pockets on the outside. Yes, the ones where your cell phone and water bottle usually go.

From there it can do what it's meant to do, which is to keep an eye on things and get your attention when it needs to without having to grow all crazy and out of proportion. Get it? Good.

Packing Tip #6:  
Allow for Empty Space

All right, then. Is there anything else we need before we head out?

Nope. I think that's it.

Oh, wait.

I see you have a question.

About the backpack.

And the fact that it's pretty much empty.

Yes, we have our open hearts and minds and eyes, and a metaphorical spyglass that takes up no room at all, and we've given fear its place because it was going to follow us anyway. But all that stuff could have gone into a pants pocket and still left room for change and car keys.

So let's consider some final reasons for the backpack.

Reason #1:  
It Needed to be Emptied Out Anyway.

When you head out on a Creative Adventure, you don't need to be carrying a lot of preconceived nonsense about who gets to make art and who doesn't, and what a Real Artist looks like and acts like, and how you'll never make a living making art so what's the point, and on and on.

None of that is useful on your Adventure.

Nor are endless worries about talent and money and credentials and time. Nor are judgments about your flawed character and all your previous failures.

As we saw earlier, your Creative Backpack held a lot of that old stuff, none of which was serving your artful intention. So we dumped it.

And then we swept all that stuff into a pillowcase and stuck it in the closet.  
Didn't you just love that part?

Now, maybe you're dealing with that stuff in some way, and maybe it's just sitting there in its pillowcase. It doesn't really matter. The point, for our purposes, is that it's out of your pack, and you aren't hauling it around with you.

This isn't therapy, after all.

This is an Artful Adventure.

We travel light, remember?

Reason #2:

Empty Space has Potential.

When the city of Paducah, Kentucky began its downtown renovation in the early years of its Artist Relocation Program, a lot of storefronts were vacant. But instead of the usual For Lease signs taped to the glass, the signs put up on those storefronts had a different message.

This is what they said:

"This Space Isn't Empty.  
It's Full of Potential."

Exactly.

Your art needs empty space in order to find its potential.

It needs to be able to stretch toward its intention without bumping into piles of doubt and boxes of cynicism.

It needs to be able to flex and turn and twist and bend, in order to gain perspective and discover fresh ways of seeing and understanding.

And it needs enough room to invite in the new when you encounter it.

Holding empty space is an acknowledgment that you intend to grow your artful life. It's your message to the world that you're ready — ready!! — for Bigger and More.

Reason #3:  
Creativity Germinates in the Dark.

Consider, if you will, the backyard vegetable garden.

Much of what we take for granted in a garden occurs unseen, beneath the surface. We plant a seed, we give the soil some water and we keep it warm, and then we watch and wait.

The magic happens out of sight.

It happens in the dark.

Something similar takes place same in our artful life, where magic and mystery occur in places beyond our ken. As Artful Adventurers, we plant seeds of intention, we pay attention to the tending and the nourishing, and then we allow life and art to guide our hand.

In the darkness inside your Creative Backpack are the seeds of your Artful Adventure. You carry them on faith, the same sort of faith that allows you to plant a daffodil bulb in the fall with all expectation of green shoots in the spring.

Expect no less from your art.

## A FEW LAST WORDS

So you're good to go.

You have a nice clean pack. It contains only what you need. You've dumped all the rest, and if you never look at the stuff you dumped, that's perfectly fine.

Analysis is overrated. Sometimes it's enough to say, "I used to think like that, and now I think like this, and thinking like this is better, because when I think like this, I get my stuff made."

And that, dear reader, is the whole point.

So hang your pack on a hook by the door, where you'll see it daily. And when the urge to create gets urgent, grab that pack and go. I think you'll find it amazingly useful, yet practically weightless, because it's both empty and full. And of course that's a contradiction. Art is full of contradiction. To borrow from Walt Whitman, art is large. It contains multitudes. So does that backpack. And so, my Artful friend, do you.

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Author ps pirro is makes art and zines and writes about unschooling and other persuasions at <http://pspirro.com>. She is the owner of the online publisher [www.mudriverpress.com](http://www.mudriverpress.com), home of unconventional reading for unfettered minds... like yours.

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