

# Coaching Creativity

by **Suzanne Falter-Barns**

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Three years ago, I was a frustrated, fed-up writer, sitting in a Starbucks in Times Square in tears. I'd gotten 27 rejections on my book - ironically enough, it was about how to live your dreams - and I was sure my own dream of being a successful author was dead. At that moment, a little voice whispered in my ear that I would only become a writer when, and if, I chose it. Like really chose it - deep in that secret place we all have in our gut.

So I chose it, simply because there didn't seem to be anything else I could do at the time. I decided to walk out of Starbucks a writer, absurd as it seemed. Two days later, I got fired from my temp job, giving me more time to write. Ten days later, I spontaneously got two assignments from a major magazine I'd never even considered writing for. Three weeks later, I finally got a publishing deal on the self-help book. Another month later, Hollywood called seeking film rights on a novel I'd published 8 years earlier that had died in the marketplace.

75,000 copies later, my self-help book, *How Much Joy Can You Stand?* (Ballantine Wellspring) is a creativity classic, a major star is making a movie of my novel, and I am a successful writer. But more than a writer, I am a coach. Through this process, I have found myself on a one-woman mission to move people to express themselves.

I've discovered that the reason more people don't express themselves is not because they can't - but because they don't realize how universal their fears are, and how necessary their work is in the world. In short, they suffer from a lack of information. It's the very same information all of us writers, artists, entrepreneurs, and other dreamers uncover as we return to our dreams, day after day, month after month, year after year. So, in order to expedite that learning curve, I thought I'd share some of these hard won lessons with you, in hopes that you can pass them on to your own clients.

## 1. Go with the flow (or without it.)

If you're going to create anything in life, pray for flow but don't count on it. 'Flow' is a much bandied-about buzz word that describes creating at max. You concentrate intensely on what you're doing, the words/images/ideas/thoughts tumble straight from your mind into your hands, the telephone rings unnoticed, and you look up three hours later, convinced only minutes have passed.

Creating in a state of flow can convince you that you are, indeed, on the right track. Yet, the converse can be true, too. If flow is missing for too long, an artist will start to feel blocked and miserable, like a constipated fish out of water. And yet ... no artist experiences flow all the time or even very often. I had to break this news once to a client I'll call Amy, who was angrily insisting that her speaking career should just fall in her lap, in a great sweep of synchronicity. Sorry, Amy, I had to say - there are good days and there are bad days, just like with anything else.

The illusion is that if we're really doing our dream, the whole darned thing should flow. Yet, some days are downright tedious, just as some days are miraculous. Professional artists know that flow cannot be counted on, so they learn to create without it -- putting their work together every single day, whether or not they're 'in the mood.'

## **2. You have to get it wrong before you can get it right.**

Out there in the rational, logical world, many people strive to get things right the first time. In an artist's studio, however, it's the mistakes that really count. In the book, *Mastery; Interviews with 30 Remarkable People*, juggler and performance artist Michael Moschen says, *"My process works very well when I have time to try it and fail, try it and fail, try it and fail. Sometimes I'll try a piece for three months and get rid of it. Then I'll go back to it again and leave it several more times, because I have to fail a lot to find out all about what the piece wants and really needs. Once it clicks and I start succeeding, you can't stop me."* Or, as Miles Davis said, *"Do not fear mistakes; there are none."*

## **3. Not every work of art is actually art.**

Over time artists become adept at sorting out which of their creations are true 'keepers' and which are mediocre 'also-rans'. This distinction comes from no place other than your gut, and can only be learned by experience.

These gut distinctions can be subtle at times, and take time to learn. After all, who really wants to admit the dark truth that the screenplay they've been writing for the past three months is actually a bore. Better to let the marketplace tell you this truth ... and it will. Yet, you may also create something that you just know is a keeper -- and the marketplace won't give it a break. The way you can distinguish what's truly a keeper is simply intuitive. Learning to make that distinction comes with learning your craft.

## **4. You are usually your own worst enemy.**

It's a classic Catch-22. You cannot truly create something great unless you are willing to share your tenderest, most vulnerable thoughts and feelings. Yet, once you do that, you may be racked with self-doubt and fear. Few artists are able to accurately assess just how valuable and great their work is -- or how much it will be appreciated by its audience. In other words, insecurity is the name of the game.

A woman who took one of my workshops wrote to let me know she had a story appearing in one of the Chicken Soup books. *"The story is too raw! It's too personal! Everybody is going to know how I feel! Everybody is going to hate it/laugh at me/roll their eyes! I'm going to die of shame/embarrassment/rejection!"* She was writhing with all that exposure, for sure. But then this was how she closed: *"Thanks for reminding me why I write. For the joy!"*

The problem is that it is hard to believe that anyone actually needs and wants what you create. And yet, this is patently untrue. Out here in Audience Land, we're all patiently waiting for the next great thing to love. Most of us (at least those of us who aren't professional critics) come from a place of appreciation and acceptance.

This is why the artists who make it continue to produce, despite the dark sense of foreboding which often accompanies their very best work.

## **5. It's good to get dirty.**

The dirtier you get, the more intimate with your work you get, whether you are messing around with sales projections or oil paints. Artists know the pure deliciousness of surrendering completely to their process. So don't worry about having to research things without a firm sense of where you're going, or whether you

get some burnt sienna on your jeans. It's good to get dirty because it means you're closer to that exalted state of flow -- a place where spelling doesn't count (for the moment), amazing synchronicities can take place, strokes of brilliance pop up out of nowhere, and things blend in new and unexpected ways.

When I lead my *How Much Joy Can You Stand?* workshop, I give everyone an unconventional material, like toilet paper, paper clips, or tin foil, and ask them to create something from it. I've seen people create entire wedding gowns from toilet paper, and exquisite wall hangings from a ball of string. The fact is, when you're given total permission to get in there, be messy, use your intuition and make mistakes, the results can be incredible. You want your coaching clients to think big and loose -- to create with a sense of danger to what they're doing. That is how greatness always begins.

## **6. You can't create for the marketplace; you can only create for you.**

I once heard an interview with a pop singer who had carefully dissected and repackaged the rhythmic patterns, vocal technique, lyric phrasing and dance moves of Michael Jackson, in an attempt to be Michael II. You have never heard of this guy because ... guess what? It didn't work. You can't buy success any more than you can duplicate genius.

The key is to do the opposite. You want to begin with your own organic idea that is born out of who you are and what you are here to do in life. Start with a concept that sparks your passion, then follow that spark as it guides you through its development.

It may even lead you into the slightly absurd - like Paige, a client I had who found herself equally drawn to interior design and spirituality. Instead of denying the connection, she used it. Now she runs an organic interiors design consulting business, creating spiritually sensitive interiors for corporations. Her business is going gangbusters.

## **7. It's the work they're rejecting, not you.**

Sometimes you go out there and dangle your creative product in the marketplace, and you get back a big, wet raspberry. Experienced artists know this has less to do with the quality of the work than what people are buying at this particular moment in time.

I used to cast television commercials in New York, and this was always a dilemma. You'd get fifteen incredible Broadway actresses vying for the role of Mom in your toothpaste commercial. (Such ads can provide several years of income, so everybody wants them.) What it always boiled down to was not who was the best Mom, but which one was a redhead, or reminded the client of his wife. Arbitrary, yes, but unfortunately true in a crowded market.

This is why artists never take rejection personally. They simply keep looking for the next opportunity to show their work, with the understanding that they are playing the odds. Sooner or later, someone's got to buy -- and if they don't, then maybe that particular piece was not destined to sell at this time. (And that doesn't mean it won't sell later.)

**Long to lead your own creativity workshops?** You can with Suzanne's [Joy Facilitator's Training](#) – the turnkey program that helps you create, book, fill and lead your own creativity workshops! Based on her best-selling creativity books, from Ballantine.

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