



Following The Artist's Way

A practical course in creativity

From America to Japan, suddenly everyone was talking about The Artist's Way, a book that will stimulate you to make your dream come true. What is the artist's way exactly and how does it work? Dutch journalist Caroline Buijs was skeptical at first, but has since become a convert.

“Write a children's book about China. For years, that was always my answer whenever the conversation got onto 'So, what do you really want to do?' Oddly enough, questions like that only pop up when the night is no longer young, when we've all had our fair share of booze and our friends or partners are in a 'I want to hear the truth' mood. After years of answering in the same vein, I'd still done nothing about my dream. Work, husband, kids, friends, and family, they all wanted a piece of me. Which I was glad to give. But I also had this loyal, niggling voice in my head that was always taunting me with claims like 'You don't really think you'd be able to pull off a book on China, now do you?' So, how did I make room for my dream? It was time to spring into action, and follow Julia Cameron's course book, *The Artist's Way*. As the course blurb says: 'We can all do with a bit more inspiration to brighten up our lives. It will make you aware all over again of the things you really want and desire and it will make room for the things that energize you.' Cameron's practical course book has sold over two million copies worldwide. At the end of each chapter is a set of fun writing assignments, such as 'If you had five extra lives, what would you do in each of them?', 'Describe your childhood bedroom', and 'Write yourself a letter as if you were eighty

years old. Which dreams would you encourage?' I know myself well enough to know that normally with this kind of book, I would get stuck round about Chapter Two. However, doing the course with others should fix that, especially as we are doing our assignments in class. Frederike Dekkers, owner of the *Morgenster* (Morning star) coaching agency, is giving the course in a cozy canal house in Amsterdam. For twelve weeks, I will be spending every Wednesday night there, with three other women who are also looking to create 'more space'.

THE VOICE IN MY HEAD

The first thing we learn, the basis of the book, is that we have to write three pages every morning. Three whole pages! The topic doesn't matter, just write three full pages about anything. Don't know what to say? Just write 'I don't know what to say'. For me any excuse to buy a nice new notepad will do, but writing three pages a day? Why? Frederike explains that the stuff you write down in the morning – usually all those whiny things, such as fretting about grocery shopping or work – would otherwise be getting between you and your creativity. Cameron wants me to get up half an hour earlier each morning, but that's taking things a bit too far, especially in winter. So I write my morning pages on the train, on my way to work or – on weekends – lying in ➔

bed. And if there's no other option, at night, so my fretting doesn't conflict with my 'oh so creative dreams'. Every week Frederike checks how often we've done 'our pages' – at 41 I'm not about to lie – so it's definitely a great shot in the arm to actually get down and write them. And indeed, after a week or so, I find I'm actually starting to enjoy it more and more. It helps me organize my thoughts and that allows me to focus more on my work during the rest of the day. What's

The writing assignments are fun: 'If you had five extra lives, what would you do in each of them?'

more, your morning pages allow you to whine and gripe, freeing your partner or a friend from having to offer themselves up as your audience. When I read in the book that doing the morning pages will lead you to your 'internal censor' I feel a flicker of recognition. The little voice in my head that keeps telling me I'll never write a kids' book on China, that's my internal censor! I learn that all the negative opinions my censor has aren't the truth. Just talk to the hand, I think, now that my censor's poisonous little voice keeps getting louder. Or, at Frederike's suggestion, I write down exactly what my censor is saying. Finally, I see what an incredible big mouth he is.

AN EYE FOR HUBCAPS

Another important basic tool from the book is the 'artist date'. At first I thought I might be going out on the town with a wildly attractive sculptor, but that's definitely not what this date is about. I am supposed to go and look – all on my lonesome – for the artist-child inside of me. Sigh. What a load of old twaddle. Frederike tries to help me overcome my

resentment with a practical approach. An artist date means making time for yourself every week, with an eye to feeding your creative awareness. There's nothing woolly about that, Frederike says. If you want to make something, you have to keep filling your inner artistic reservoir. To do that you need new images and to focus on the details, for instance by taking a walk you haven't taken before or taking photos in the city for a few hours. Or by cracking open those old art books, or browsing through a thrift shop. It does sound quite logical and even fun. In class we put together our own list of ten ideas for an artist date, share them with each other and so I end up going home with forty ideas! But what am I supposed to do with my artist-child when I find it? "Don't take it too seriously," Frederike advises. "Choose something you like doing, not something 'seemly' or 'artsy'. The point is to rediscover what it's like to play." So one day I'm on a walk, out on my artistic date, following an unfamiliar route and consciously taking the time to really look at building facades and tiles, and then I realize that this is a lot like my walks I used to take with the kids back when they were tiny. They would always dwell endlessly along the way (in their case beside hubcaps and bicycle spokes, but even so). Cameron would be proud of me.

HELP, I'M ADDICTED TO READING!

The assignment for week four – a whole week without reading – caused lots of complaints in the group. Especially from me. I simply cannot imagine going without reading for a whole week. The paper, magazines, and books: I read every day. My kids really liked checking up on me. When I fetch the afternoon paper from the letterbox and (automatically) walk in reading, my son catches me out. "Surely I can read just a little item on the back page?" I wail. But he is unrelenting. My daughter stands guard by the bathroom, as we keep stacks of magazines in there. The first few days I found it very hard to keep from reading, but after that I started to see the benefits. All the time it saves! I found that, almost unconsciously, I reach out for something to read all the time. In the bathroom, in bed, on the couch, while I'm cooking, in the train, in the car (but not when I driving, of course). Now that I've stopped, I can see what happens instead. Normally I'd go for ➡





the newspaper as soon as the kids are in bed, but now I sit on the couch for an hour – till it gets dark – and watch how beautifully the sky changes color. I finally get round to painting that chest of drawers that had been up for a make-over for such a long time. I sew cushions for the couch (and notice how much fun I have making something from fabric), write letters to friends, play old albums and fool around with Indian ink. All the things I would never have gotten round to doing if I had automatically read the paper (or watched TV or surfed the internet – things that are off limits as well this week). The diagnosis is clear: I am addicted to reading.

HOBBIES: NOT DULL, BUT USEFUL!

Cameron has made it official: hobbies aren't dull, they're useful. Yay! During my week of abstinence from reading and the rest, I discovered that operating a sewing machine is fun – especially if I've been working on an interview all day. Fooling around and making things is very soothing for your mind and the great thing is, you get an instant result (if you stick to small projects you can finish in one day). As Cameron says, "Hobbies are of creative use because they stimulate the artistic part of your brain and often help you get to great artistic breakthroughs." The great thing about hobbies is that they make no demands on your ego. Cameron asks us to do something every day to stimulate our creativity. So I cut out pictures of beautiful

(unattainable) interiors. I buy pretty postcards, fill my pockets with shells, and get a kick out of bits of retro fabric, ribbon, and paper. I am enjoying myself, creativity feels a lot closer this way and – literally – more of an everyday occurrence. According to Cameron it's best to introduce small changes, very slowly, to your current situation. That means I need to deal with all my griping about not having my own workspace. Rather than wallow in what is missing (something blocked creative people love doing, as actually getting down and doing something means accepting responsibility), I should focus on what I have. I have a good look at our house. Our bedroom is actually quite a nice size, so what am I whining about? I get into the car with my son and go out and buy a white shelf. Basically this will be my new workspace – a simple work shelf in our bedroom. I add a beautiful old chest of drawers from a kitchen by Dutch designer Piet Zwart that we had standing around doing nothing. Get a desk chair, make a nice cushion for it and pin pictures of stuff I like on the wall. It all works! All it costs me is an afternoon's shopping and only 67 euros. Rather than whine about something unattainable, I now have my own space at home where I can work. On my China book?! Well, the odds of that happening are better now that I've learnt from my artist dates how to free up time. And if I enjoy writing as much as I enjoy my new useful hobbies, the chance of success is much greater. ●