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# ART LESSONS

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**SUSAN KAPUSCINSKI GAYLORD**

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Being an artist is not about fame or fortune, where you show or how much you sell. Being an artist is a full-time life, not just a full-time job or a career. *Art Lessons* is about my relationship to my work with hard-won truths that I have learned during my forty-plus years of making art: the role of patience, the development of the critical eye, the struggle with perfection, and the idea that an artist's best teacher is the work itself. I tell you my story as a starting point for you to tell yours and share these pages in hopes that they might lighten your way.

*Susan*

## INTRODUCTION

When I was a girl, I took after school art lessons for about a year. I showed no particular promise and remember little except making a color wheel and how difficult it was to mix blue and red and get purple instead of brown. I only remember the little red house by the river where the lessons were held because my mother painted a small picture of it that hangs in my studio. It wasn't until adulthood that I had any thought of making a life in art.

*Art Lessons* tells some of my story and shares the lessons I have learned along the way. I hope that you may gain some insight from my words and be inspired to spend time with your own story. It is there you can learn from the best of teachers—yourself and your work. As David Bayles and Ted Orland wrote in *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of ARTMAKING*:

“Put simply, your work is your guide:  
a complete, comprehensive, limitless reference book on your work.  
There is no other such book, and it is yours alone.”

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# SOUND YOUR INSTRUMENTS OF JOY

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## TRADITIONAL ENGLISH CAROL

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I first heard this traditional carol on the album *Just Say Nowell* by the group *Nowell Sing We Clear*. They are my favorite musical accompaniment to the solstice season with their beautiful melding of voices and knowledge of and love for traditional music and custom. Tony Barrand of the group first heard the carol played on BBC radio in a 1932 recording by the Mabe Choir from Cornwall.

## SOUND YOUR INSTRUMENTS OF JOY

“Sound your instruments of joy!” If I had to come up with five words to describe our purpose on earth, I might choose these. That is the task for all of us, whether we are artists or not. It starts with a question: what is your instrument? For some, the answer is so obvious the question does not need to be asked. They seem to leave the cradle with a desire and facility for playing the piano, or writing stories, or drawing and sketching. I was not that person.

I grew up in a house full of creative activity with a mother who knitted, sewed, cooked, and engaged in craft making of all kinds—melting wax for floating candles and gathering milkweed pods for the wings of angel ornaments. In my high school years, I was a serious student and a determined athlete. In college, I studied in English Literature and exercised my creative impulses by embroidering every wearable surface I could find—bell bottom jeans, work shirts, knapsacks, and army jackets.

Somewhere in the years after graduation, as I tried to figure out what it was that I wanted to do with my life, I remember thinking that I could either learn a lot of different things and make them part of my daily life (this was the back-to-nature 1970s and I envisioned dining on clunky pottery plates and wearing hand-stitched garments) while having a job of some sort, or find one thing to get good at and have that be what I did for a living and a life.

At age twenty-seven, the answer to the question arrived with a request from a friend from high school. She had a friend who wanted some lettering done in her wedding album and remembered that I had dabbled in calligraphy. After the wedding page was done (I would cringe to see it today), I was hooked. Learning calligraphy became my new job. Unemployed at the time, I spent my days practicing at the dining room table.

Here is where the second phase of the sounding comes in—getting to the point that our understanding of and competence on the instrument becomes so much a part of us that we can feel joy as we work and create something in which the ease and effortlessness that shows through. One of the first things every instructional book and every teacher of calligraphy addresses is how to hold the pen—loosely, gently, and without pressure. I would start with that intention and, two lines later, realize that my pen was in a death grip as I battled to make a “g” that looked like the model. Although I was entranced with every aspect of calligraphy, the strain of learning showed in every letter I made.

Slowly I became comfortable with forming the letters and was able to pay attention to rhythm and gesture. I learned about papers and texture, colors and paint. I used brushes and reeds as well as pens. I added new interests—making books, taking photographs, and designing on the computer. My instrument became instruments. My creative world became larger. Slowly I began to see my efforts rewarded. My wish for us all is that we be blessed with the desire to create and the fortitude and discipline to do the work necessary to sound, boldly and freely, our instruments of joy.

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SMILE  
AT  
YOUR  
HEART

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**ROSE DOBOSZ**

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In Qi Gong class, Rose instructs us to let our feet connect with the earth and the back of our heads reach up to sky as we place our hands one on top of the other on our chests. We breathe deeply and feel the energy move through our bodies as she says, “Smile at your heart.”

## SMILE AT YOUR HEART

My son has said to me, “You need to be as generous to yourself as you are to others.” It isn’t always easy. Self-criticism and self-awareness have been my long-time companions. I call them my “critical eye.”

For me, the critical eye is active twice. The first is when I am at work. It is my partner. It gives me guidance as I make a brushstroke, stitch a bead, or assemble images on the computer. It helps my work grow. The second is after I am finished, when I step back and see what I have done from a distance. Then it can become my enemy.

With calligraphy, the long initial phase of my learning was about the eye as much as the hand, seeing as much as doing. The basic principles of art and design, the fundamental drama of light and dark, positive and negative space, were played out with every mark I made. While I formed a letter or wrote a word, I was completely engaged and absorbed in the challenge. It was after I finished that I saw the flaws and became discouraged.

In 1982, about four years in, I spent a week of mornings with Jaki Svaren at the Philadelphia Conference on the Calligraphic Arts. I chose the class because I loved Jaki’s book, *Written Letters*. Her twenty-two alphabets are accompanied by a running commentary from big ideas on letterform, letter history and philosophy to detailed hints about the formation of each letter. Her voice is kind and clear: “Strive for equal amounts of white space between the letters, but delight in your humanity.”

Jaki introduced us to the book *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki. She urged us to take away value judgements in reference to our lettering. If we make a letter and think it’s good, it puts pressure on us as we make the next one. If we look at a letter we have just made and say it’s bad, it decreases our confidence and our flow and we don’t make the next one with the right attitude. Suzuki wrote: “Good and bad are only in your mind. So we should not say, ‘This is good,’ or ‘This is bad.’ Instead of saying bad you should say, ‘not-to-do!’”

Our critical eye is what enables our work to be our guide. If we love the work for itself more than for the result, we will find a way. It is our hearts, forgiving and strong, supple and generous, that will carry us through. May we continually let Rose’s words echo in our minds and smile at our hearts.

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LET ME  
LISTEN  
TO ME  
AND NOT  
TO THEM

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## GERTRUDE STEIN

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“Let me listen to me and not to them” is the first line of Stanza VII of Gertrude Stein’s 1932 work, *Stanzas in Meditation*. John Ashbery, in July 1957 issue of *Poetry Magazine*, wrote: “But it is usually not events which interest Miss Stein, rather it is their ‘way of happening,’ and the story of *Stanzas in Meditation* is a general, all-purpose model which each reader can adapt to fit his own set of particulars.” I thank Gertrude Stein for writing such a perfect line that fits my own set of particulars so well.

## LET ME LISTEN TO ME AND NOT TO THEM

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Looking back, I don't think I had an auspicious start as an independent-thinking artist. In my memory, I am lying on the floor with my crayons and favorite coloring book of garden flowers—roses and lilies, peonies and columbines. I am soothed by the sound of the crayons moving across the paper, challenged by keeping a smooth texture while staying within the lines, and content with the knowledge that a beautiful representation of the flowers I love in my grandfather's garden awaits me at the end. I never thought that it would be better or more rewarding to draw or paint my own versions.

That same child did have another side. I would never call myself feisty but I did have a deep vein of stubbornness and determination. My mother and I had fierce fights over my clothing and hair in the '60s when jeans and work shirts replaced sweater sets and pearls and rollers no longer put waves and curls in my hair.

When I immersed myself in calligraphy in my late twenties, I had no formal training in art and design. I learned calligraphy first from books and then in workshops. For years, and to some extent still, my first impulse was always to color within the lines, to stay loyal to what I started with, to accept the authority of the author of the book or the leader of the workshop. I came to see that it is not about rules but principles. Rules get under our skin and ask to be broken. Principles ask to be understood.

As I became more comfortable with the technical and design aspects of calligraphy, I began to ask myself the deeper question: what did I want to say? As a calligrapher who used the words of others, I was what my mentor Jenny Hunter Groat described as an interpretive artist. Her example was the ballerina Margot Fonteyn. I realized that I would rather be Martha Graham, Jenny's example of an originating artist.

I created the first work I consider truly my own in 1986. The previous year had been a tumultuous one. My mother died unexpectedly in January and my first child, my son, was born in June. Out of this came *Childbirth Journey*, a series of fifteen pieces with abstract pastel drawings and excerpts from my journal. After exhibiting it, I felt that the wall was not the appropriate place for sharing these intimate thoughts and turned to the more private space of the handmade book.

While my first books used my own texts in calligraphy and type, I soon found myself moving away from words and narrative sequence. I created images on the photocopier and made simple accordion books that used repetition as a primary element. Insecure in the strength of the imagery, I wrote texts on the back of the pages to explain what I thought the books were about. When a poet friend came to visit, I showed her one of the books. She said that there were so many things to see in it that she could look at it for a long time. As soon as she left, I covered the words. I shouldn't be telling people what to think. Any poetry in the piece was not in the words but in the object itself.

Every time I moved out of the self-imposed lines I was honoring, it took bursts of both determination and desperation. Every transition grew out of months of struggle filled with tears. Each time I needed to stop making rules for myself and dig down to the next layer of making art—to take what I knew and step into the unknown. Our work is what leads us in new directions. We need to let it be our guide and have the belief and the confidence to follow it. It is listening to us, which happens as we work, that allows us to make art that is truly our own.



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LET US  
BORROW  
EMPTY  
VESSELS

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## MEISTER ECKHART

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Eckhart von Hochheim, known as Meister Eckhart, was a thirteenth-century German theologian, philosopher and mystic.

## LET US BORROW EMPTY VESSELS

I first became acquainted with this quote from Meister Eckhart in Lewis Hyde's *The Gift*, a book that has been very influential in my thinking about my work. Hyde describes art in the creation stage as a gift in two ways—the gift of the natural talents of the artist and the gift of inspiration. He sees a third stage, when the art leaves its maker's hands. He writes: “The art that matters to us—which moves the heart, or revives the soul, or delights the senses, or offers courage for living, however we choose to describe the experience—that work is received by us as a gift received.”

By acknowledging the gifts we are given, we have companions in our work. We are not alone but inhabited by some larger spirit. I like to think beyond the work to the ultimate gift we are given, the gift of life and its fundamental element, the breath. With each one, we bring the outside in and let the inside out. It is all about balance. The exhale is as important as the inhale. My Alexander Technique teacher has taught me to exhale as completely as possible by counting from one to ten over and over until there is no breath left. And then, after a pause, to relax and let the air flow in. I am emptying the vessel that is me—of old thoughts and ideas, of resentments and disappointments—to make room for the new.

We need to take in, pause and absorb, and release into new work. We need inspiration but not overload. We need to look at the work of our artist ancestors and our peers to renew and rekindle the spark within us, while also protecting the space where our own voice lives and grows. To feed the strong center where the gift can flourish, we need to keep the balance of the breath in every thing we do.

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NOT A  
HAVING AND  
A RESTING,  
BUT A  
GROWING  
AND A  
BECOMING

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MATTHEW ARNOLD

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Victorian poet and critic Matthew Arnold was speaking of perfection when he wrote “Not a having and a resting, but a growing and a becoming” in an essay that was part of the collection, *Culture and Anarchy*, which was published in 1869.

## NOT A HAVING AND A RESTING

There are several definitions of the word perfect and most are limiting: conforming absolutely to the description or definition of an ideal type; excellent or complete beyond practical or theoretical improvement; entirely without any flaws, defects, or shortcomings; accurate, exact, or correct in every detail. This is the perfection I envision as a glass castle glimmering in the distance. When I come closer, I see that the walls are shiny and sheer and there are no windows or doors. There is no way in. Our work should be an open door—an invitation to think, to sing, to dance, to feel—to both ourselves and our viewers.

The word perfect has one more definition: exactly fitting the need in a certain situation or for a certain purpose. I use it often in this way. A student is set to fold a piece of paper and asks “Is this okay?” “Perfect.” My daughter is sautéing onions and asks, “How are these?” “They’re perfect,” I answer. Do I mean that the paper or the onions have reached some ideal state of perfection, that they are the ultimate of all possibilities? No, but are they, for the moment at hand, exactly what is needed? Yes. We need to seek not the ideal but the real, using the materials that are in our hands, the experiences that have shaped our thinking, and the feelings that have affected our spirit.

When I work, I don’t set out with a goal of making something beautiful, nor do I have a vision of what the piece will look like at the end. What I seek is harmony. I am trying to make something in which all the parts work together to form a pleasing and integrated whole. I think of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. Like the little bear’s porridge, I want it to be “just right.”

One of the gifts of artmaking is the opportunity to inhabit, at least some of the time, a place of our own. Even if we express the conflict and chaos we see around us in our work, we can still experience the peace of making harmony as we put pen to paper, brush to canvas, or fingers to keyboard.

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A YEAR  
DOESN'T  
MATTER  
TEN YEARS  
ARE  
NOTHING

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**RAINER MARIA RILKE**

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In this there is no measuring with time. A year doesn't matter; ten years are nothing. To be an artist means not to compute or count; it means to ripen as the tree, which does not force its sap, but stands unshaken in the storms of spring with no fear that summer might not follow. It will come regardless. But it comes only to those who live as though eternity stretches before them, carefree, silent, and endless. I learn it daily, learn it with many pains, for which I am grateful. Patience is all!

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

## A YEAR DOESN'T MATTER

Thirty-three years ago, after I had spent a year at the dining room table with instructional manuals, paper, pens, and ink, I would have said I knew a lot about patience. As the years went on, I realized how much more there was, and still is, to learn. The patience of the moment, what you need to form a letter or make a brushstroke or play a note, lengthens to the patience of an hour, and then a day, a year, and then, ten, twenty, thirty. I have come to see that it is only by stepping outside of the counting of time that work truly grows.

My most significant collection of work has been the Spirit Books which are handmade books of textured papers with twigs, beads, stitched spirals, and pinpricked designs that rest in cradles of branches and roots. I made the first one in 1992. The seeds of the work were sown four years earlier after a massive pruning around our house which yielded huge piles of lilac, grape vines, roses, and honeysuckle. Some of the pieces were interesting and sculptural but most were just sticks and vines. As I cut them to make them more manageable, I felt that they were filled with life and brought as many as I could into the studio.

In the intervening years, I experimented with the twigs and branches—binding them into bundles and placing them in boxes. While they enabled me to express my reverence for the natural world, they weren't works of art. And then, one fall day, I made a book of natural papers that rested in a cradle of grape vines. Although I had been working with book arts for several years, I never thought to connect the two. Artists, scientists, everyone, has these aha! experiences. An idea or a problem has been percolating for a long time. Seemingly out of nowhere comes that mysterious, mystical moment when something outside, or deep within, ourselves, takes over and something new is created.

The greatest gift we can give ourselves as artists is the gift of time: time to gather—to walk and read and think and see, time to play—to doodle and dabble and try new materials and mediums, time to work, and time to reflect—to let work sit and sink in so we can come back to it with fresh eyes.

We need to acknowledge that no time spent in creative activity is ever wasted. Sometimes we see it in specific ways. Bits and pieces of the past have a way of creeping into the work of the present. What was left behind as a tangent can become the basis of new work five years later. Sometimes the value is purely in the time spent with intention. Every time we become deeply immersed in our work, we break through the barrier of time into a sacred space where we lose ourselves in the creative process and gain strength, resilience, and patience.

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TAKE!  
JOY!

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## ERNEST TEMPLE HARGROVE

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English-born Ernest Temple Hargrove was a founding member of the Theosophical Society in America. Before his death in 1939, he wrote a fictional letter attributed to a 16th-century monk named Fra Giovanni with the words: “I salute you. There is nothing I can give you which you have not. But there is much, that while I cannot give, you can take. No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in it today. Take heaven! No place lies in the future which is not hidden in this present instant. Take peace! The gloom of the world is but a shadow. Behind it, yet within our reach, is joy. Take joy!

## TAKE JOY!

Joy is what I want from my work these days. Now that I feel that I have found my instruments of joy, I want to sound them with all my heart. In tune and in harmony is how I want to spend my hours.

My mother once said to me, “You don’t have a guilty bone in your body.” This was in the early ‘70s. She was troubled by my embrace of the changing times and my rejection of the Catholic definitions of sin she had carried with her from childhood. I felt like I had guilt aplenty, but perhaps she was right. What has stayed with and motivated me for all these years has not been guilt, but the sense that for something to be good, it must be hard.

When I began in the arts, it was hard work to gain the skills I needed to express myself. As I tried to take all I learned and make it mine, the emotional part of the equation was hard work as well. I am now in a position that it does not have to be. I have reached a level of comfort with the technical aspects of my art. I feel more creative now than I ever have in my life. I am full of ideas and possibilities. Yet, after so many years of striving, it feels too simple, too lazy, selfish even. As compelled by an inner need to do my work as I am, I have never gotten completely past the idea that it is an exercise in self-indulgence. How can it be that the rest of the world is going to a job, commuting, putting in hours that are often difficult or boring or unsatisfying or all of the above and I am playing in my studio?

At sixty-one, I am determined to give myself permission to be as selfish as I need to be to do the work I love. I have a strong sense that it’s now or never. Here’s a frequent metaphor: life is a road, a journey, a path. I’ve used it often and taken comfort in the idea that the journey is more important than the destination. Now I want a new word, a new metaphor, or better yet, no metaphor at all. Journey implies destination and I see now there is no destination, no place to get to, in the artist’s life. Saying or doing anything that implies that there is only gets in the way. We need to stop seeking the “there.” We need to live and work in the “here,” to be present and alive in every moment, and to allow ourselves to “Take joy!”



## ABOUT SUSAN

Susan's involvement in the arts includes roles as artist, teacher, speaker, writer, designer, and publisher. She is inspired by the spirit of nature and the beauty and power of words. She works in multiple media with a focus on sculptural bookmaking with natural materials and calligraphy. Her work has been featured in magazines (*Somerset Studio*, *Fiberarts*, *Bound & Lettered*, and *Letter Arts Review*) and books (*1,000 Artists' Books*, *500 Handmade Books*, *500 More Handmade Books*, *Cover to Cover*, and *The Art of the Handmade Book*) and exhibited widely across the U.S. and in Canada and South Korea.

Her publishing credits include three instructional books for Scholastic Professional Books and eight independently published titles: *Handmade Books For A Healthy Planet*, a how-to book with a purpose—promoting cultural understanding and environmental awareness through making books; *Art Lessons: Reflections From An Artist's Life*, seven essays on the artist's journey; *Words For Our Time*, a response to the 2016 election; *Suffragists Speak*, celebrating the 100th anniversary of women's right to vote; *Calligraphy: How I Fell In, Out, And In Love Again*, an illustrated memoir of my first 40 years of calligraphy; *Naming the Garden: Fifty Flowers and Their Latin Names*, a collection of photographs that serves as a gentle introduction to identifying flowers by their Latin names; and *Offerings*, 24 inspiring quotes in calligraphy.

Susan has long history of sharing her work online starting with her first website, [makingbooks.com](http://makingbooks.com), for teachers and parents on making books with children in 1999. At [susangaylord.com](http://susangaylord.com) you will find a gallery of her art, free downloads of her calligraphy, a bookstore of her titles, instructional videos on simple bookmaking with recycled materials, conversational videos on art and life, and links to her blog and [makingbooks.com](http://makingbooks.com).

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