

## **Introduction**

I got sober at 43. I had been a shy and frightened child, an angst-ridden teenager, a codependent lover, a driven student, a demanding college professor, a self-proclaimed intellectual, and a confirmed cynic. And for the 20 years before I entered a treatment center in Lynchburg, Virginia, a high-functioning drunk. But I had never seen myself as a creative or as an artist.

Today, 23 years later, creativity and artmaking are a central part of my life—and, somewhat surprisingly to me, a crucial part of my ongoing recovery from alcoholism. Many things have helped me stay sober: working the 12 Steps, thousands of meetings, working with sponsors, prayer, meditation, therapy, and perhaps most importantly, a mysterious Grace that I do not understand. But nothing has made me happier in sobriety than being actively creative.

For the last decade, as creative self-expression has become more and more of what I do and how I live, I've been struck by the parallels between successful recovery and the creative process. How the values that lead to one are just as important in the other. How when I coach writers who are stuck, I use techniques from recovery. And how when I sponsor women in recovery, I use creative process techniques to help them strengthen their sobriety.

This book is a compilation of my thinkings and learnings about the two processes: recovery and creative self-expression. I am heavily indebted to the work of Eric Maisel, Julia Cameron, Pamela K. Metz, and dozens of others including major contributor Bridget Benton\*, who have taught me so much about myself and what a life can be if we open our hearts to the creative.

My hope is that the ideas and exercises in this book can open a door for you into that creative place that can strengthen sobriety and bring you some of the peace and happiness that I have found in artmaking.

## **1 Creativity as process**

One of the benefits of practicing creative self-expression (aka artmaking in some form) is that it is often a rich and meaningful experience of process. As I write this, my mind and heart are engaged in a number of activities. Choosing the next ideas from among many, choosing the words to express them, organizing them, crafting them. It's a process I've grown accustomed to as a writer and it is usually invisible to me.

Similarly when I paint, I make dozens of small decisions in each minute: color, stroke, placement, to smudge or keep sharp, juxtaposition of line and shape. I zoom in and pan out for different perspectives on the image or the paragraph. It's a complex process, but when I let go of thinking about the complexity and just do it, my mind is fully engaged, and my anxiety and restlessness and boredom slip away.

## **2 Recovery as process**

Learning to be comfortable in process is a good thing for those of us in recovery. When I drank, I drank to get numb. I wanted to get as far away from the process of living my life as I could because that process felt unbearable. But when we get sober, we have to be in the process all our waking hours. This, I think, is one of the true meanings of "one day at a time." Not only do we not drink or use one day at a time, but we are asked to be in our lives one day, one minute at a time. We are asked to stay in the process.

For that's what recovery is—a process, and a complex one. There is no product, no being done with recovery. We stay in it, and we make choices, both conscious and unconscious. We observe it and we do it. Immersing myself in writing and painting as processes has made recovery easier and richer for me.

My friend Lindy Fox often says that every day in recovery, we have a choice to make. We can choose to be well or we can choose to be sick and crazy. Part of being well for me is choosing to do something creative.

## **3 Grace in the creative process**

Early this week, I had an amazing experience at the studio. I'd been struggling with a cold for a few days and had pretty low energy. But I had left a painting not quite finished and wanted to complete it. I knew that it wouldn't take too long so down to the studio I went. The building was quiet (my studio is a coop where 22 artists work), and I

put on my iPod and settled into reds and pale yellows. In a half-hour, I was finished. It wasn't one of my best but it had some good moments.

I hated to leave. I had at least an hour more that I could be there, but I didn't feel up to starting another big piece. So I cast around for something to do.

In the opening chapter of my first novel, which I finished a few years ago, the main character is watching his best friend orchestrate the weaving of yards of colored silk into a split-rail fence. For the last couple of years, I've wanted to paint something I could use on the cover of the novel if I ever self-published it. But the dozen efforts I'd made so far had been pretty awful. I just couldn't get the fence to look right, let alone weave the colors in.

A few days before I'd found a website for a fence company in North Carolina. The fence and the forest looked a bit more like what I had envisioned, so I downloaded a couple of the photos. Now in the studio, I pulled them out and got some colored pencils and a big scrap of paper and began playing with drawing the fence from the photo. Again, the first effort was unsatisfying. But I didn't feel disheartened. I was in a light mood and happy to just be in process, so I turned the paper over and got out some harder pastels I don't use often and tried again. This time, somehow, I just knew how to draw the fence. It wasn't something I figured out. It was a knowing that descended on me.

And I relaxed into it and I knew I needed to do a third drawing and this time on black paper. So I scrounged around and found the only black thing I had, the backing off a pad of drawing paper, and I redid the drawing in about 10 minutes. It was perfect—just what I had wanted. Being willing to go with and stay in the process manifested a product I couldn't get when I tried for it. I call this *grace*.

#### **4 The grace of sobriety**

The spiritual experience of grace was not evident to me until I'd been sober a few years. When I first heard the saying "There but for the grace of God..." in meetings, I heard it as gratitude that my drinking life had been no worse than it was. Gratitude that I hadn't killed anybody driving drunk or ruined my health or had children who had suffered from my numbed feelings and bad choices.

It took me a while to understand that my own actions weren't the only thing keeping me sober. I learned that out of the 20 people in my treatment group, only two of us were still sober at the end of a year, a sad 10% statistic that continues to prove true

about those who enter recovery. Knowing this didn't make me feel special or proud of myself. It made me curious.

I know that my intelligence didn't get me sober. I've been blessed with a good amount of smarts and have always been a good student and a quick thinker. But all of that was no match for alcohol, which, as we know, is "cunning, baffling, and powerful." I could not think myself sober any more than I could will myself sober.

I found out years after I "graduated" from the treatment center that the staff there had a pool on me. They'd had college professors come through treatment before and the longest any of them had lasted was a week. The staff were sure I'd follow suit. Professors apparently believed they were smarter than the other patients, smarter than the counselors. Elitism, snobbery—that's what the staff believed. But I think it was fear. These other academics had gotten themselves into a place where the intelligence they counted on was of no help. Only courage and willingness were going to be of any use, and my guess is they weren't sure how to call on those.

I stuck out the 28 days. I now know this acceptance, this persistence was grace.

## **5 Courage and willingness are key to both processes**

Courage and willingness are probably the two most important things in the sobriety tool-kit. The courage to change and the willingness to find another way. And to keep finding another way, not just once and for all but one day at a time. Recovery is a long-term apprenticeship. We don't *get* recovered. We are *in* recovery, continually learning how to create a life that supports sobriety. Process, not product. Progress, not perfection.

Courage and willingness are also essential tools in creative self-expression. The courage to learn about the medium of expression that we've been called to or have chosen. The willingness to show up to the computer screen, to the musical instrument, to the canvas, to the garden, to the potter's wheel, and play. The courage to try new things, to keep expanding our repertoire of skills and possibilities. The willingness to move through periods of discouragement, of boredom, of emotional discomfort, and keep showing up.

A great deal of creative self-expression is showing up to the work. A great deal of sobriety is showing up for life instead of turning away.