

On Artists and Hope- lessness

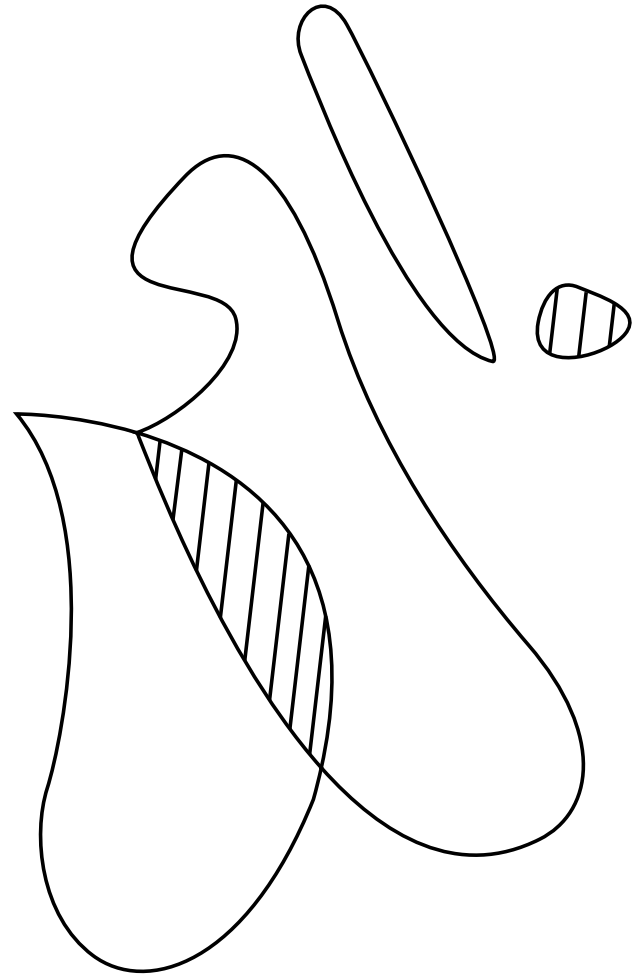
By Beth Pickens

Dear artists and writers,

I created this pamphlet because I see and experience the ways hopelessness is a direct outcome of political chaos — an accumulation of overwhelm, feelings of powerlessness, and a desire for something different that seems impossible or very far away. I am particularly interested in how hopelessness manifests in artists and writers, how the difficulty of building a sustaining art career interacts with other circumstances to make one feel hopeless about the world, about the future, and even about their creative practice.

This pamphlet is an attempt to respond to artists' and writers' feelings of hopelessness. I hope to provide strategies and possibly some reprieve. Hopelessness can be undone by a change in perspective. It's never your final feeling; like all feelings, it will pass.

Beth Pickens
Los Angeles, Summer 2018



A Lifelong Practice

You and your Self are going to be together for a long, long time. You will have a relationship with you for the rest of your life so why not make it a better one? By working on yourself and growing, changing, or otherwise improving your relationship to yourself, you can build the foundation to have a life with more joy and serenity.

Artists and writers, you will also need to maintain a practice throughout your life. Artists have to make art because it's a fundamental way you understand and process your lives, experiences, relationships, and the world around you. What could happen if you shift your relationship to your creative work to that of a lifelong relationship? Rather than a battle, a gentle surrender to this crucial part of your being.

Your practice will delight, enrage, disappoint, sustain, bore, confuse, electrify, pay, cost, and drain you. (Sometimes all in the same day.) Just like all the other parts of your life, your feelings about and assessment of it shift and change *without making it less crucial to your wellbeing.*

If your practice never yields you a single dime, you still must love and care for and maintain it because it's giving you something back. Do not misunderstand me; I want you to work toward getting and increasing compensation for your creative labor. Whether or not this happens, now or in 30 years, please maintain your ongoing creative practices. You will have a better perspective of your life because of it.

Suicidal Thoughts

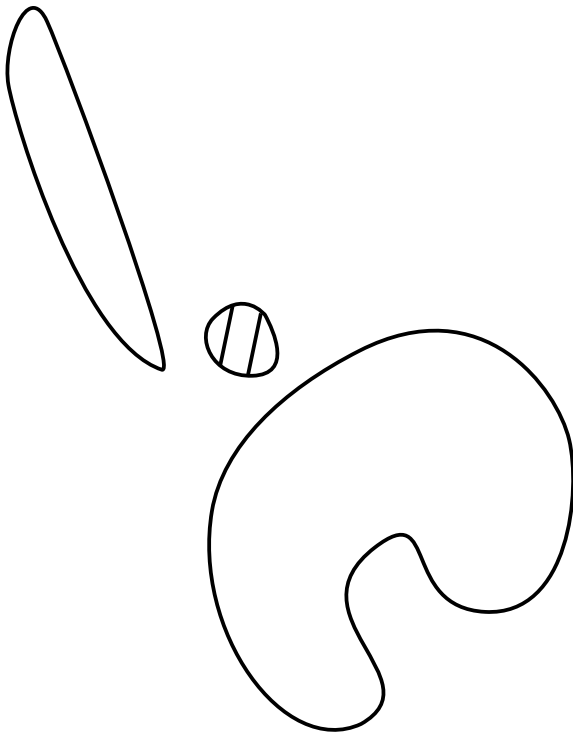
Thinking about suicide is more common than you might assume. We have fleeting thoughts that surprise us, desperate moments in which we just want some relief, and profound grief that fuels deep hopelessness. These are common human experiences, often related to painful circumstances in life and/or challenges with mental health (both of which are also common).

Thoughts of suicide come up for many of us and you are never alone in having these thoughts. They can be really scary and make a person feel isolated, but many, many people that you know and admire have thought about suicide at least once in their lives.

Like other thoughts that scare or unsettle you, suicidal thoughts can be framed as a useful trigger – an urgent flag in your mind waving and indicating *Hey! You need something! Pay attention! Please call someone who loves you!*

A helpful reminder: you are not responsible for your first thought. You are responsible for your second thought. You can respond to a suicidal thought with a different, compassionate, and supportive thought; and a simple, manageable action like eating a meal, texting a friend, going to a movie, and asking for help.

Suicidal thoughts can be an indicator that it is time to get into therapy, join a 12-step recovery program, deepen intimacy with healthy people around you, or even just get out of your home and go for a walk to move your thoughts along.

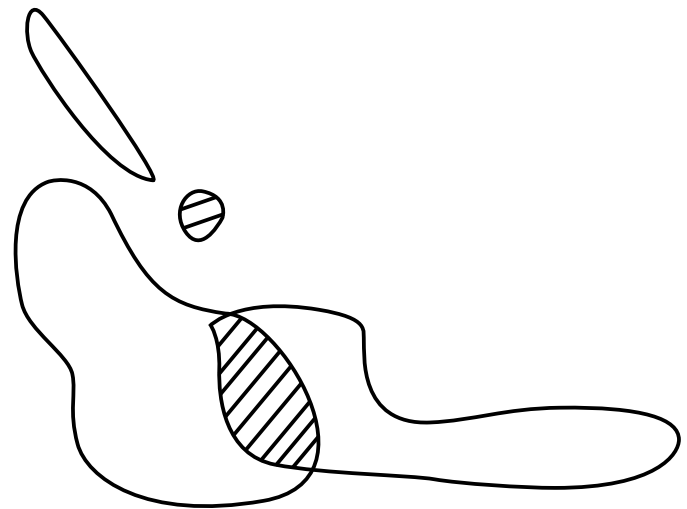


Frame these thoughts not as something to enact, to fear, or to prove something bad about yourself, but just a sign that you need something right now from someone who cares about you. Hopelessness and sadness are never your final feelings. Feelings pass and change; change is a constant we can rely on.

You are worth investing the time and money into getting into treatment for depression, suicidal ideation, anxiety, and any other experiences that are making life difficult. Nothing is untreatable. Just take the next step toward professional support.

There is massive difference between suicidal thoughts and suicidal planning. Making a plan to carry out suicide equals emergency. If you or someone you know has a plan and intends to carry it out, now is the time for immediate intervention with professionals. You can find many local resources by looking up suicide prevention online. Start by calling the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or use their online chat tool.

When someone is in enormous pain, they might think suicide is a rational solution. However, suicide's finality has devastating impact on everyone they know and love.



Dear Artists; What Makes You Feel Hopeless?

On my Instagram account @bethpickensconsulting, I publicly asked artists to tell me what makes them feel hopeless. Here are some responses...

Seeing someone younger than me doing things I want to achieve.

There is always someone younger. Someone older, too. You are on a continuum, not a ladder. (Turn the ladder on its side.) Compare and despair, my friend! Comparing someone's exterior to your interior will make you feel awful. What that younger/older/other person is doing is not your business. What you're doing is your business. When you see something you want that another person achieved, take one step toward that goal. The only useful comparison is current you to past you.

I feel hopeless when I think about the gap between the "best version" of my idea and what I've completed so far.

I notice a touch of perfectionism in this statement. A *best* version may not exist simply because *best* may actually translate as *perfect* in your mind. Your artist and writer brain cannot accurately reflect your work back at you. You will always see problems and improvements with previous work and pieces because the you who completed it has already grown and changed and is very, very good at being critical.

Consider pushing yourself in your current or next piece toward *better*, getting closer to executing what is in your mind's eye. Appreciate and value your previous, completed

work because it reflects who you were, your skills, and your interests when you made it.

Maybe you're in the midst of the work and it's not *there* yet so you keep working at it. That's ok! Your drafts and iterations all contribute to creating the final work, which will reflect who you are and what are doing right now. Invite outside feedback from trusted peers, take what you like and leave the rest.

Marketing myself.

Ugh, I understand. I, for example, avoided marketing my consulting business for seven years and relied instead on word of mouth. This worked until it didn't work: I wrote a book and was hit with the realization that I can't really sell my book by word of mouth. I needed to market it. I'd previously been very unwilling to engage in any professional social media. I didn't even have a website! When I was about ten months out from my publication date, I decided to commit to marketing the book. I hired an artist friend to design a website and another friend, a social media expert, gave me some insight into building accounts from the ground up. I didn't want to do any of it, truthfully.

I had to make a critical distinction. Rather than marketing myself, I am marketing The Work. *It's for the book*, I said to myself each time I didn't feel like doing my marketing tasks. Often artists are more willing to do something hard or uncomfortable if it's on behalf of their work rather than themselves as individuals.

Working so hard to write grants and applications and getting a lot of rejection letters for things you really want.

It's true. Most of the things you apply for you won't get. And that's true for everyone else, as well. If you don't apply, you will absolutely not get it. You have to have your hat in the ring to be considered. One of my genius artist friends, an actual card-carrying MacArthur Genius, can show you a garage filled with files of rejections. Tons and tons of rejections. The more you apply for, the more you will get *and* the more you will be rejected.

Since you have limited time for the business side of your practice each month, be strategic about which opportunities you are applying for. Are you eligible? Are you in a career phase that is relative to previous recipients? Have you taken a grant writing workshop online or at a local arts service center? Is it an opportunity you really want and are willing to continue to apply for until you get it?

I recommend that when you get rejected from a big thing, you gather your friends who were also rejected and console each other over dinner. I promise you're in great company; lots of brilliant people get rejected from everything. When your friends get the thing you didn't get, celebrate them and ask their advice for the next round time around.

Trying to access gatekeepers but then feeling like an opportunist. Also trying to insert myself into existing networks that seem completely disinterested in expanding, yet are again the gatekeepers of opportunities.

You have to ask for things. This does not make you opportunistic. Other people are asking for things, why shouldn't you? Asking is what gets you results. When a gatekeeper says no or says nothing at all, move on to the next one. When you think an existing network seems completely disinterested, first interrogate that assumption. Are they truly disinterested, or are things just not happening on your timeline? Are you assuming no answer (yet) means NO? Are you cultivating opportunities to show/present what you do with your creative community, outside of formal constraints? You and your artist friends can make anything happen and soon. You don't have to wait for a gatekeeper to say yes to showing your work.

Many people are awkward, sort of shy, or feel weird in network-y professional art situations. Those gatekeepers may outwardly seem disinterested in person but that may not be at all what's going on for them inside.

I feel hopeless when I think about capitalism and how artists and low income people struggle so much to survive with limited money and resources and affordable places to live

Individually, we are powerless over capitalism. It's bigger than me and bigger than you. We each have our individual roles, votes, and contributions that we can make toward economic justice. This is crucial; it takes our individual actions that join with millions of others' individual actions to create real change. It's also true that we're likely going to live in capitalism in the US throughout our lives.

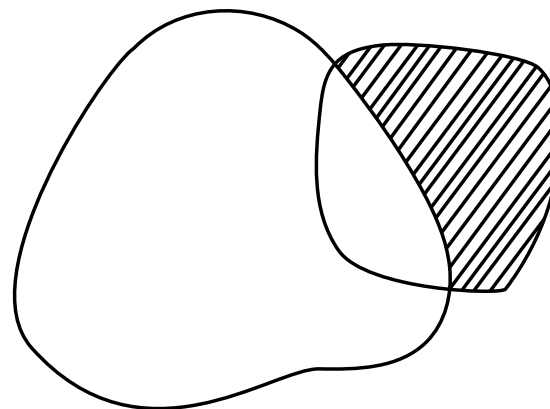
Capitalism makes us feel crazy because *it's* crazy. The absurd wealth controlled by a small quantity of people with an ever-widening gap between the ultra-wealthy and the working poor, college-educated adults with massive student loan debt, and swelling populations of people without homes. This is enough to turn a fine mood into a feeling of endless hopelessness, yes.

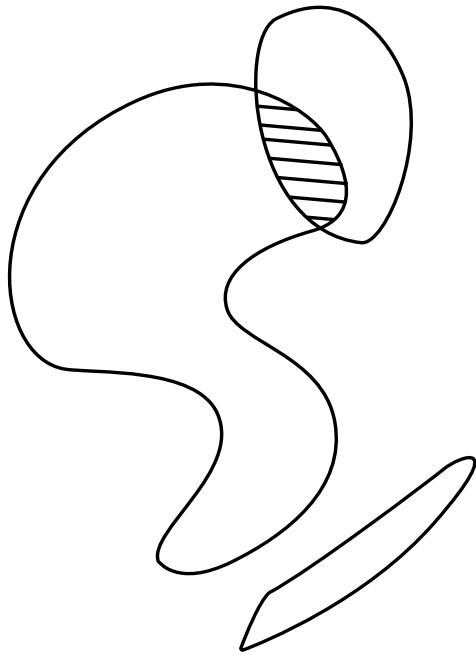
You do, however, have power and influence over your own personal financial life including how you earn money and steps to increase your income. Sometimes, I've observed, we get that backwards; we think we can somehow overthrow capitalist exploitation but we are bewildered over how to reign in our own spending. Just flip that around — you have the most control over your own finances. Next, you have some power and influence over economic justice and wealth distribution in your immediate community, and then the wider town you live in, and, finally, the smallest bit over the larger economic system.

Start with you and your family and friends. As you care for yourself financially, you can be of service to the people in your life and the people in your communities.

How do you move forward with work/projects when you feel hopeless and debilitated by something insane is happening in the public sphere/outside of your control? What if you feel hopeless on a national level?

I wrote a pamphlet, *Making Art During Fascism*, and a book, *Your Art Will Save Your Life*, that both respond to this very issue. My short answer (as you go find these other, longer resources) is this: continuing your soulful work and maintaining your creative practice will help give you the stamina and willingness to continue working for justice.





Practices to Cultivate Hope

1. Write a short gratitude list every morning. Start with 3-5 reasons you feel grateful that moment and then add more each week.
2. Try some meditation. Listen to short guided meditations or sit quietly, just observing your thoughts for ten minutes each morning, five days in a row.
3. Take one day a week (two is ideal but I'll settle for one) on which you do not do any paid work nor do you work

on your art practice. Protect one day per week when you experience all the other parts of your life and relationships besides work.

4. Deepen intimacy with a friend in your town who you admire through simple time spent together. Ask them questions about their life and work and push yourself to show more of you to them.
5. Make a list of the people you love. Living or dead, work your way through writing love letters to them all.
6. Visualize yourself in 10 years. Ask this person to offer you wisdom of how to get from here to there.
7. Truly be of service to someone else in your community through volunteering, even just an hour a week. A friend or stranger, one person or a community – it all works.
8. Commit to one thing you will start doing to help your physical body regularly.
9. Abstain from news and social media for 24 hours. I swear you can.
10. Incorporate books about history into your reading. Anywhere, anytime – your choice. Reading about history helps your perspective about today.

BONUS: Keep a short list posted in your home of things you know will make you feel hopeful. Mine includes: watching TinyKitchen videos on Instagram, brushing my giant orange cat, reading history from 100+ years ago anywhere in the world (Lapham's Quarterly really works), seeing art outside of my home (like, any other place besides my bed or couch), reading about death and dying, my spiritual practices, swimming and hiking, making a list of my friends and then contacting them one at a time.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

A pdf version of this pamphlet is available through
bethpickens.com

