

DO YOUR ART

A Manifesto on Rejecting Apathy
to **Bring Your Best** to the World

CHAD R. ALLEN

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Who Am I?

A Guy Named Jan

I recently visited an exhibit at the Seattle Art Museum titled *Master Painters*. The focus was a collection of pieces from The Netherlands during the seventeenth century, a period known as the Dutch Golden Age.

One painting in particular grabbed my attention: a stunning maritime scene of ships at anchor. I took in the beautiful blues, dramatic clouds, and glowing sails for a long time.

Then I scanned the artist's biography:

“self-taught”

“never joined the local art guild”

“for the pleasure of it”

“second to Rembrandt as a painter of light”

The artist was Jan Van De Cappelle, a wealthy industrialist who spent the majority of his time running his father's dye works, which he inherited. But on the side he did something else entirely.

I like to imagine Jan at the end of a workday, grabbing his coat and hat. I like to think of him rushing out to a good view of the water where he could paint.

He could have done a lot of other things in his spare time. He had enough money to sit back and relax. He could have indulged himself or watched the seventeenth-century equivalent of *The Bachelor*.

But over a hundred surviving paintings tell us what he did.

Jan Van De Cappelle did his art.

What's Your Art?

What's your side project? What's your art?

Maybe you're not doing it yet. Maybe you're just thinking about it.

Or maybe you've just started.

Or maybe you sense there is some kind of art for you, but you don't know what it is exactly.

Maybe you've been doing it for a long time, and you're tired.

No matter where you are, I'm writing this for you.

What We Need from You

My dad has a friend named Irv. Irv's lifelong passion is working on cars, and I'm not talking about classic roadsters or sexy sports cars. The beater everyone else has given up on is more Irv's speed. He relishes showing the world he can get another 30,000 miles out of that old Buick.

I don't know what Irv's day job is, but he *lives* to slip on his jumpsuit, step into his garage, and get his hands in the grease and metal.

Irv reminds me of this theory I have. It's nothing scientific, just a pet hypothesis I've been nursing for a while. It goes like this: the thing that makes life worth living is an art project on the side. Some have called this a "side hustle."

Maybe it's an antique you're restoring. A manuscript you're tinkering with. A scrapbook you're creating. A triathlon you're training for. A dish you're perfecting.

Whatever your side hustle is, keep doing it. Better yet, do more of it.

That's what we need from you.

That's where your desire and the world's need come together.

At this point I'm supposed to say that if you work really hard on it, this side project will become your day job. Of course, this does happen.

But what if that doesn't happen? What if this is always just a side project for you?

So what?

You see, I think sometimes we hijack what's possible in the present because we don't think it can live up to our hopes for the future.

We destroy *now* because we're afraid of *then*.

But that's crazy. Let go of those expectations and just do your thing—today. A wise man once said, "Tomorrow has enough trouble of its own."

Today you can make a choice to engage your passion.

Today you can tell the other voices to go to hell.

Today you can be the artist you were made to be.

A Million Water Coolers

Ten years ago we had distractions.

There was a water cooler. People congregated around it and were distracted from whatever it was they should have been doing.

But now we have water coolers on our desks. We have them at home too. Most distracting of all, we have water coolers in our pockets and purses.

Anytime we need a little hit of self-validation, anytime we need to escape, we can just pull it out.

Email. Facebook. Twitter. Pinterest. Instagram. YouTube. Web. Traffic stats.

They're always right there.

As Todd Henry says, we are having to learn a fundamentally different way to be human.

Let's start by calling all these distractions what they really are: apathy.

So Really, What Is It?

As I think about my friends, my family, and myself, here are the dreams that come to mind. Maybe you resonate with one or more of these:

A new business	Switzerland
A blog	Starting a nonprofit
A novel	Activism
A website	Providing an experience for others
Speaking	A killer app
Painting	Teaching
Parent coaching	Travel in general
Iron Man	Rebuilding Haiti
Life coaching	Sponsoring 100 needy children
Asia	Farming
Empowering	Family
A corporate position	
Nonprofit work	

My Art Is:

Go ahead. Finish the sentence.

Keep Trying the First Step

My six-year-old son won a slinky from Chuck E. Cheese.

It wasn't long before we tried to do what they do in the commercials. That's right—we headed for the top of the stairs.

We tried. And tried.

At best the slinky walked down a step or two, then died. Dead slinky. “Dang,” I thought, “Maybe this is something they do with CGI on the commercials. Maybe it can't happen in real life.”

But my son was determined.

Then it
happened.

He grabbed the top ring of the slinky, slammed it down to the next step, and off it went. Live slinky!

Fifteen steps all by itself. I'm not kidding.

Now, hit the slow-motion button. My son and I are ecstatic. Eyes the size of pizzas, cheering, wild smiles. Utter elation.

My son jumped. Now hit pause. See him? His hair is straight up. Mouth open. Hands in the air. Legs all over the place. Got that image?

That's you too.

If you keep trying the first step.

What Is Your First Step?

What is the first step you need to keep trying?

Writing a weekly or daily blog post?

Asking some friends for advice?

Applying to that program?

Going to the gym on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays?

Writing a chapter a month?

Connecting with so-and-so?

Buying a URL?

Writing a guest post?

Offering your speaking services?

Writing a book proposal?

Writing a manifesto?

URL Junkie

Jon Acuff was a URL junkie. He bought URLs like I eat jelly beans—one after another. He'd have an idea and buy a URL.

Idea. URL. Idea. URL.

And then finally he stumbled on an idea that would change everything: www.StuffChristiansLike.com.

His first week he hit 4,000 views, and off he went.

Thomas Edison said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

Ask anyone who's done something great if they know about trying something over and over again until it hits.

They all do.

And you can too.

My First Step Is:

Now finish this sentence.

Don't Go It Alone

It was my son's first day of kindergarten, and to be honest, my wife and I were a wreck. He's our first child, and while I think we knew deep down he was ready, was he really? Could he do this? Could *we*?

I picked him up and held him. Trying to steady my voice, I whispered the best advice I knew to give in that moment: "Remember, bud, the best way to find a friend is to . . ."

"*be* a friend," he finished my sentence.

It was a line we'd rehearsed many times before, and it comes from a children's book that unfortunately is difficult to find nowadays: *Little Bear Finds a Friend*.

I could have said a lot of different things. "Listen to your teacher." "Be a good boy." "Play nice." But I said what I did because I know how important friends are.

It is no exaggeration to say that my friends have been the difference between a decent life and a complete and utter wreckage of a life. Friends have been my salvation.

But not just that: friends make life fun! I think this is one reason adolescents often pull away from their parents in favor of friends. For the first time they've discovered a society of like-minded peers, and it's intoxicating.

But that doesn't mean friendship is easy. It requires commitment and vulnerability and forgiveness. Close friendships require that we show our dark side. When I've done this, it feels like I'm holding up the broken pieces and saying, "Here's where I am. Here's me. Can you live with that?"

It is a scary place to be.

But if your friend can be with the person you really are, you have a precious ally for all that comes your way. And you have the opportunity to be the same for him or her.

We can do our art in many different ways.

My advice: Don't go it alone.

What's Your Dream?

I love the scene at the beginning of *Pretty Woman* when a thoroughly urban fellow approaches complete strangers with an imposing question.

"What's your dream?" he asks. "Everyone who comes to Hollywood got a dream. Hey, what's your dream?"

I love that scene because the man makes a very intimate question public. He brings it out in the open.

We need that guy in our lives. We need people who get in our face and ask that question.

Who's that guy in your life?

Hey, what's your dream?

I Will Ask This Person to Be My Creative Partner:

What It Takes

My therapist told me a story about a fellow therapist.

He noticed how she did life. She had a nicely decorated office. She regularly went out for lunch with friends. When she ate in the office lounge, it was always a healthy lunch. He often saw her reading a book in the morning.

One day when they were both eating lunch in the lounge, he got up the nerve to say something. He said he noticed how intentional she seemed to be, how rich her life was. He gave examples of what he admired.

“Well, I’m an alcoholic,” she said. He did not see that coming.

“You’re what?”

“I’m an alcoholic. I’ve been sober for many years, but I have to do these things to make my life so rich I won’t go back to the bottle. Living a beautiful life is not optional for me. I could die if I don’t.”

Aren’t we all in that situation? We’re either living or dying. The stakes are high.

This lady took the time to live a beautiful life because the alternative was death. What are you choosing when you aren't choosing to live the life you want to live? Unhappiness? Obesity? Depression? Anger? Loneliness? Fear?

The Power of Your Calendar

Michael Hyatt says it best perhaps: "What gets scheduled gets done."

We're all busy. We have regular jobs and families and obligations.

But this is your art, your dream, we're talking about. This is important.

Some, like blogger Andy Traub, find it useful to fall in love with 5:00 a.m. What could you get done if you worked from 5 to 7 every weekday morning? That's ten hours a week.

Some prefer late-night creative sessions. What could you accomplish from 9 to 11?

It takes discipline. Frankly, it takes more discipline than I have, but I'm trying, and when I'm successful I experience deep joy.

I find it helpful to have an idea of how I'm going to spend those two hours ahead of time. If I have a blog topic in mind, I'm more likely to get up and go.

What about lunch? Can you turn lunch into a time of mutual collaboration with a fellow creative or two?

Can you leave work early or come in late every once in a while? Can you take a whole day off and invest it in your art? You and your art are worth that!

Can you ask for a week of unpaid leave?

Should you pay someone to clean the house or do the laundry or mow the lawn so that you can spend that time on your art?

Would you give up one TV show a week so you could spend that hour on your art?

Could you find a volunteer project that feeds your art and helps others at the same time?

Ask a friend to be your check-in buddy. Once a week, text each other to say how you've pursued your art during that week.

Get creative.

I'm not saying this is easy, but I am saying that the time is there for you to find. You can do this.

And we need you to do it.

I Will Find the Time by Doing This:

Don't Quit

My friend Robert updated his Facebook page:

Last week I received an email that began with this: “Dear Mr. _: I am pleased to inform you that the Doctoral Studies Committee has admitted you into Ph.D. studies.”

Yesterday I received an email that began with this: “Dear Mr. _: I am pleased to inform you that the Doctoral Studies Committee has awarded you a Tuition Scholarship.”

It took fourteen unsuccessful applications over the course of seven years before I finally received these emails.

Find something you want to do, work hard, and don't quit.

I can't say it any better.

Find something you want to do.

Work hard.

Don't quit.

What We All Want

I've noticed something about older people. Many of them are unhappy.

But every now and again I encounter an elderly man or woman who is happy—genuinely happy.

They show us what we all want. We want to end well.

So think about this: What life do you need to live so that you end with a smile?

Me?

A life of art.

Putting It All Together

My art is:

My first step is:

I will ask this person to be my creative partner:

I will find the time by doing this:

Special Thanks

Thank you for reading *Do Your Art: A Manifesto on Rejecting Apathy to Bring Your Best to the World*.

If it's been helpful to you, I hope you'll send it to a friend or two. I don't mind.

My art is a combination of writing, blogging, speaking, teaching, traveling, and social justice. I don't have it all figured out. I fail as often as I win, but I'm determined to keep trying. I'm falling in love with my failures because they help me learn.

If you would like to share what your art is with the world, I've set up a page on my blog (www.chadrallen.com) called "What's Your Art?" where you can do that. Check back now and again to encourage others who post there.

I'd love to hear what your art is, and if I can help I will. Email me here: chad@chadrallen.com

If your art involves writing or publishing or creativity, I hope you'll keep checking in on my blog. If you're subscribed, you'll start receiving my blog posts via email. Easy!

Not subscribed? Visit http://eepurl.com/xvt_L.

I also want to say thank you to Alyssa, Lucas, Claire, Robert, Rebecca, Nurya, Peter, Dudley, Dan, Joe, Ruth, Lisa, Nate, and Denise. I'm grateful to be on the journey with you.

Who Am I?

I'm Chad R. Allen. I use my middle initial to let everyone know I'm not the actor who goes by the same first and last names. (Remind me to tell you about my middle name. Funny story.)

I serve as editorial director for Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, one of the largest Christian publishers in the world. I blog about writing, publishing, life, and creativity at www.chadrallen.com. My wife and I live with our two children in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

My passion is to help people do their art.

Notes

Use this space to “dream out loud.”

Here’s a possible exercise: (1) Write a paragraph about what your art is. What do you want to contribute to the world? (2) Then write a paragraph about your first step. What do you need to keep doing over and over until it hits? (3) Next write about who you’re going to ask to be your creative partner and why. (4) Finally, write about how you’re going to make time to do your art.

You can do this, and we need you to do it.

