

“I was at the MacDowell Colony when I got the e-mail asking me to deliver this Commencement address. It was my birthday. My first thought was: ME? How could they be asking ME this? I’m just a child, a perpetual art student myself! Another voice chimed in: “Cindy, it’s your 52nd birthday. Grow up. Maybe they actually think you’re worthy of this. Is that so strange?”

I wrote back accepting the offer, but I hesitated, and couldn’t bring myself to press send until the next day, when, making my morning tea, I read the little fortune on the tea bag tag. “You will never find happiness if you do not conquer your own doubt.”

When I think about it, I realize that my initial response to most challenges—like this one, a project, or a job—is some combination of doubt and laziness. Something like, “I can’t do this, I don’t know how. It will be difficult. It will take time. I might not do it well! What do I need this for?” Something in me always rises up to meet the occasion and in the end I say yes. I pressed send.

When I got my first waitressing job I was asked if I had experience. I didn’t, but I said yes. I stumbled through the first couple of days and then realized, “This is easy. Of course I can do this!” When I was interviewed for my first teaching job, I was asked the same question. Again, I said yes. I got the job. I was terrified that in some way I was not up to the task or that I would fail. But I embraced the challenge and after sweating through the first year of classes (literally) I ended up really enjoying it and I think being quite good at it, growing in ways I never knew I could.

So that’s the first thing I want to say to you—we all have fears and we all have doubts. And it’s much more interesting to fly in the face of them, rather than let them hold you back. We all fall down. We all embarrass ourselves. We all make work that sucks. For every great work by any artist, there are many, many works that don’t even approach greatness. My film, *Phyllis and Harold*, is right now playing in five theatres across the country, which is an amazing and surprising achievement for me. But I’ve been making films for a long, long time. 31 years, to be exact. It took this long to make a work that has gone out into the world in a big way and that even I can stand to look at and actually admire.

30 years ago, as a young art student, I never imagined that I would have a film playing in theatres; never imagined that I would be standing here today; never imagined I would be happily married to a man I adore who is a brilliant and successful artist—a true inspiration to me and to others.

One of the things I realize when I look back on my life since art school is that the shortest distance between two points is not a straight line. The life of an artist is a crooked path. There is no proscribed way to get there. You have to be curious. Take risks. Be open to change, to the unknown. These are the freedoms, and the requirements, of being an artist. Everything you do leads you somewhere unexpected. The oddest, seemingly unrelated jobs, assignments, and experiences will shape you, and they will feed your work and your life in mysterious ways.

Nothing is random. Each experience, relationship, project, leads to the next, and when you look back you realize you could not have gotten where you are without having lived each of them. It's like a big jigsaw puzzle. Each piece will eventually fit. So, be brave. Stay alert. Don't be afraid to fail. There is no such thing as failure. There is only process. What baby ever learned to walk without falling down over and over again?

François Truffaut once interviewed Alfred Hitchcock and asked him how he felt about the fact that one of his films did poorly at the box office, got bad reviews and was a failure. Hitchcock replied that he didn't see it as a failure at all; for him the film was a huge success because if it hadn't been for that shot of the glass of milk, he never would have gotten the idea for his next film.

The film I made before *Phyllis and Harold*, *Inside Out*, is one I now consider an unsuccessful work. I don't show it and I don't look at it. But with every single film I've made (12 films over 30 years) it has always been the thing that falls short or does not work that drives me to correct it next time, drives me to improve, to learn more, to be better at my craft. I would never have been able to make *Phyllis and Harold* without having made *Inside Out*. It in fact, I see it now as a study for the later film.

During the twelve years that I worked on *Phyllis and Harold* it never occurred to me that I might see its title on a marquee. While I was making it I was not thinking about an audience or a goal. I was doing it because I had to do it, and I loved to do it.

The arts are a lonely and hermetic calling, much like a holy religious order. Those who practice them all their lives are part of the tradition that began with our ancestors who went deep into the mountains to paint by tallow light on the walls of caves. They made these extraordinary cave images and then they sealed them shut, presumably never to be seen again by anyone. What I'm saying here is, do not confuse art with commerce. If you are thinking: "Will this sell?" "Will they like it?" "Is it marketable?" "Will I be successful?" or "Will I be famous?" you are not listening to your instincts and you are not having fun. Thinking these thoughts will hamper your creative spirit and what you make in that state will not be authentic or truthful. Watch children play. Let's say, they are pretending to be pirates. They are not thinking, "Am I giving a good performance?" "Am I doing it right?" "Am I good?" "Am I better than the other kids?" "Do my parents like it?" No! They just become pirates.

So, find a balance. Find the balance that works for you. "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and render unto Christ what is Christ's." Caesar's is the practical life, Christ's is the spiritual life. You have to live in both worlds, but don't confuse them.

I have a writer friend who grew up in German-occupied Poland, a Jewish child who survived with false Aryan papers. Growing up with such terrifying uncertainty, there were too many fears associated with trying to live a life solely as a writer. He NEEDED to make a living, so he became a successful lawyer; but he also NEEDED to write, and so, over the past 50 years, he has written 11 esteemed books at night and on weekends.

You all probably know about Simon Rodia, who singlehandedly built what we now call the Watts Towers, over 35 years. By day he was a tiler and cement finisher who foraged the job lot and his neighborhood for materials for his art. With the little money he made he bought bags of cement, sand and steel. He worked his jobs all day and the towers all night. The tallest tower, at 100 feet, was built with no bolts, rivets or welds. It still stands today and has passed every structural test the state of California has subjected it to. In interviews Rodia never explained

what he was doing or why. He only said over and over: I'm going to DO something. And when he was finished, after 35 years, he gave the land and the towers to a friend and moved away, never to see them again.

Only you can discover the balance—and the life—that's right for you. When you find yourself comparing yourself to others, thinking they are better than you, more successful, more articulate, more erudite, more intellectual, funnier, smarter, thinner, prettier, more talented, more dedicated, remember: only you are you! Only you can do what you do.

I went to a psychic once in a creative crisis and told him I didn't want to be an artist anymore, I wanted to go back to school to become a therapist. He looked me in the eyes and said to me very sternly:

“You have been born with a gift. Unlike others, you have been given the ability to live out many lifetimes in one lifetime, through your work. You have a responsibility toward it. You cannot turn away.”

So, cherish your gift and devote yourself to it. See yourself as an instrument, as a conduit. Take care of your instrument. Keep it tuned and polished. Hone it. Sharpen it. Listen to it. Serve it. Practice it. Avoid what is toxic for you, whether that is relationships, substances, other people's opinions and voices. Your body is the vessel that contains your gift. Respect it, care for it. Don't abuse it. The bottom line is: We only get one life, in this form, anyway. At best, it is very short. We never know how short, when it is going to end.

You are young and then you're middle aged and then you're old and then you're dead. At each stage, except death, you keep looking back trying to figure out how you got there. Where did the time go? How did it go so fast? You don't want to be looking back asking, where did it go wrong? You don't want to have regrets. You don't want to waste time.

All people, not just artists, but businessmen, scientists, inventors, everyone who becomes successful and fulfilled all have a passion for something and follow it without compromise.

It is not about talent. There are millions of people in the world with talent. It is about devotion and practice and tenacity. And when a certain number of years have passed, you realize life is about the ones left standing. As a teacher I was often asked, “Should I become a film director?” My answer was always, “If you have to ask, then the answer is no.” Artists do what we do because we have to do it. Because we can’t imagine doing anything else and staying sane. It’s that simple.

There is a famous quote by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe that begins, “Whatever it is you dream you can do, begin it.” Whatever it is you feel passionate about, do it. Do not put it off. Do not wait. Do not compromise. Be curious. Be fierce. Be tenacious. Be eager. Pay attention.

Before I came to the Museum School as a student, I attended Wesleyan University straight out of high school. I went there for two years and then decided to leave because I wanted to study film animation. So I enrolled in a summer intensive animation workshop given through MIT. I got so excited about the course, and about the animators I met there, that I called my father to tell him I was not going back to Wesleyan, that I was going to stay in Boston, get a job, and make films. He exploded.

“No daughter of mine is going to be a college drop-out! If you don’t enroll in school immediately you’ll never get another penny from me and you’ll be disowned!”

It was August and that’s how I ended up at the Museum School. It was an accident, really. And it changed my life in many significant ways. It was here that I found my direction, with excellent guidance from teachers and students who are still among my closest friends. Just days ago I stood on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art with Doug and Mike Starn, who were my classmates here, at the opening of their awe-inspiring sculpture, *Big Bambú* and marveled at what brought us here—they on that roof and me touring the country with my film after SO many years of hard work and dedication. We were, we are, the ones left standing. And if you play and work hard enough, you will be too.

Congratulations and good luck!”

—Cindy Kleine (BFA ’82, Dip’ 83, FY ’84)