

Dear Young-ish artist,

I noticed that you needed to be reminded of a few things – many of which I'm sure you already know. But it doesn't hurt to be reminded. So here it goes.

Taking the path of an artist is a radical one. There is no steady paycheck, 401K or linear trajectory. You do it because it's either art or insanity; or because you have a gift that needs to be shared with the world; or because you want to be famous. But here's the deal: it takes time to cultivate it. Very few of us can jump out of undergrad and earn a living as a novelist. Sometimes you have to take a job writing copy at an internet company to prove that you can take care of yourself; or you have to take several jobs so you can buy the materials for your giant octopus sculpture; or you have to experience the darkest grief of your life in order to find your voice. And there will be lots of bad poems and terrible paintings and bad decisions before anything comes of it. It takes time and it takes space and sometimes it takes doing very little alone or in the company of other like-minded people for these things to happen. Everything is part of it. So be patient, pay attention, and be kind to yourself.

Maybe it will take 15 years, so in the year 2028, when you quit your day job writing ad copy for Hologram Space to begin. Maybe then you'll decide to finish the novel you've been plugging away at in your free evenings. You decide to do it because it's been nagging at you for years, sometimes making you feel so empty inside that you don't recognize yourself, your spouse, or your children. And as you finally jump into this adventure it dawns on you: it's always been here. You've always had everything you needed to do it. It just took you this long to accept this and the uncertainty of the process. And, now finally, you've said yes and things are happening. Don't scold yourself for taking so long, just appreciate that you've finally made it here.

Sincerely,

Your friend

Susan O'Malley, "An Unsolicited Open Letter to the Young-ish Artist (this means all of us, right?)." May 29, 2013, susanomalley.org; republished by Invisible Venue, March 22, 2015.