seven little ways to live art

A week-long companion

to *A Million Little Ways*

by emily p. freeman

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Welcome to Seven Little Ways to Live Art.

This seven day companion guide is a simple introduction to the small ways living art may look for you right now.

You don’t have to read the book to use the guide.

If you’ve already read the book, hopefully this guide will be a timely reminder of what it might mean to live as an artist in your life right now.

Today you can start by reading the Introduction and Way One.

I hope these words are kind companions for you.

Intro – Defining Art

Way 1 – Be Where You Are

Way 2 – Use What You Have

Way 3 – Practice Courage

Way 4 – Cultivate Generosity

Way 5 – Release Outcomes

Way 6 – Rehearse Wonder

Way 7 – Let Things Grow

Introduction

Defining Art

We are all artists.

Obviously we aren't all painters or musicians, but we all have the power to influence, to move into the world fully awake and alive.

Remember, God didn't nail us together from bones on an assembly line and match up all our parts, the next one fashioned the same as the one before.

In the beginning, God *created.*

And when he made art in the beginning, he made us in his creative image.

Art came first.

Not our ideas about it or our definitions of it. Not the museum kind or the art school kind or the hipster kids with their glasses and guitars.

Just art, the kind God makes.

And when he made man and woman in his image, he gave the gift of co-creation to us.

Art is our heritage, our birthright.

I'm not an artist, you might say, *I'm a banker. A teacher. A trash collector.*

You may not be an artist by profession. But you are an artist by design.

If you are an artist by design, made by the hand of God to move into the world as the person you uniquely are, then what might it mean to live life like an artist today?

The good news is, you don't have to be extraordinary. You just have to be regular.

A regular human with a regular life and a willingness to see, as my dad often says, "beyond what is to what could be."

What if fear, discouragement, doubt, cynicism, comparison, envy, and failure didn't get to have the final say today, tomorrow, this week?

A few years ago I sat on a plane traveling from Colorado to North Carolina.

It was a long ride and I hate to fly so I was actually thankful for my chatty travel companion.

We talked about his job (he makes and fixes trains for a living), my college major (sign language interpreting) and corny jokes we've heard.

He told me all the words his baby knew in sign language and I told him if he was right or not.

At one point in our conversation, he asked me what my life motto was, and after I got over feeling like I was in middle school again, I immediately answered him:

“I just want to live my life less like a list and more like a lyric.”

It surprised me as much as it did him.

But now that I’ve had more time to think about it, I’m not sure I would change much about my response.

What might it mean to live life like a lyric rather than a list?

Maybe it means releasing yourself to live as the person you most deeply are rather than who you think you should be.

It could mean embracing your smallness by bringing your ordinary work to Jesus, knowing he does miracles with little offerings.

It could also mean releasing the outcome of your interactions with people and the results of your work.

Would your shoulders relax? Would your jaw loosen up? Would your fists open up in your lap?

Lyrical living?
Let's try it, just for a week.
If it doesn't work out, you can always go back to your list.

Way One:

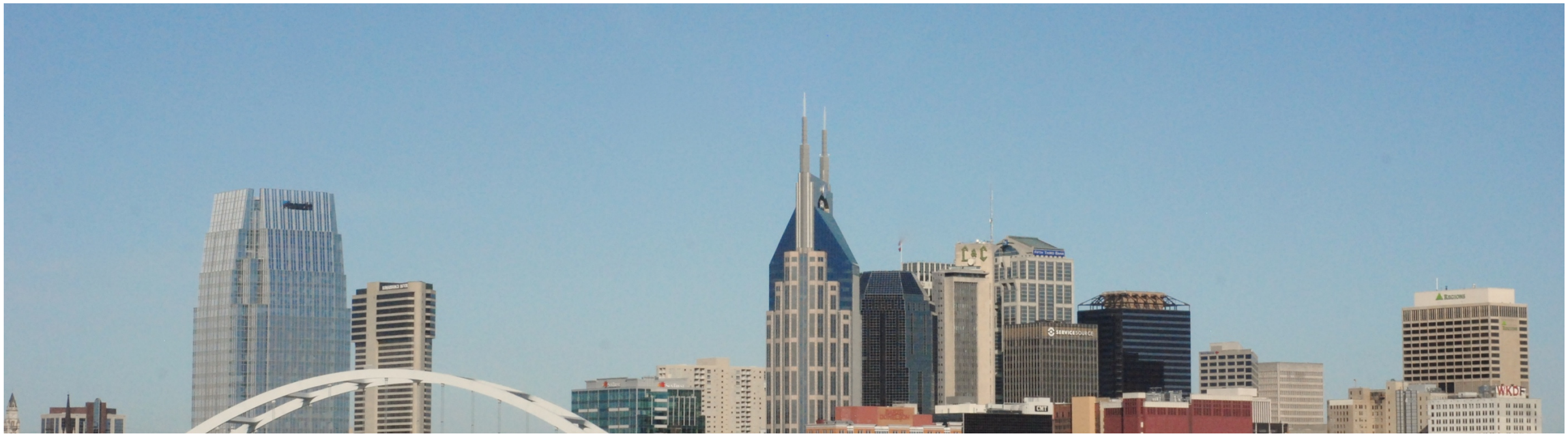
Be Where You Are

Learning to practice art with your life is not some kind of unicorns-and-rainbows club.

Living art is not for those who only see the glass half-full.

It does not just mean being nice, offering random acts of kindness, learning to paint or sing or play the guitar in your free time – although these actions could be a result of living art.

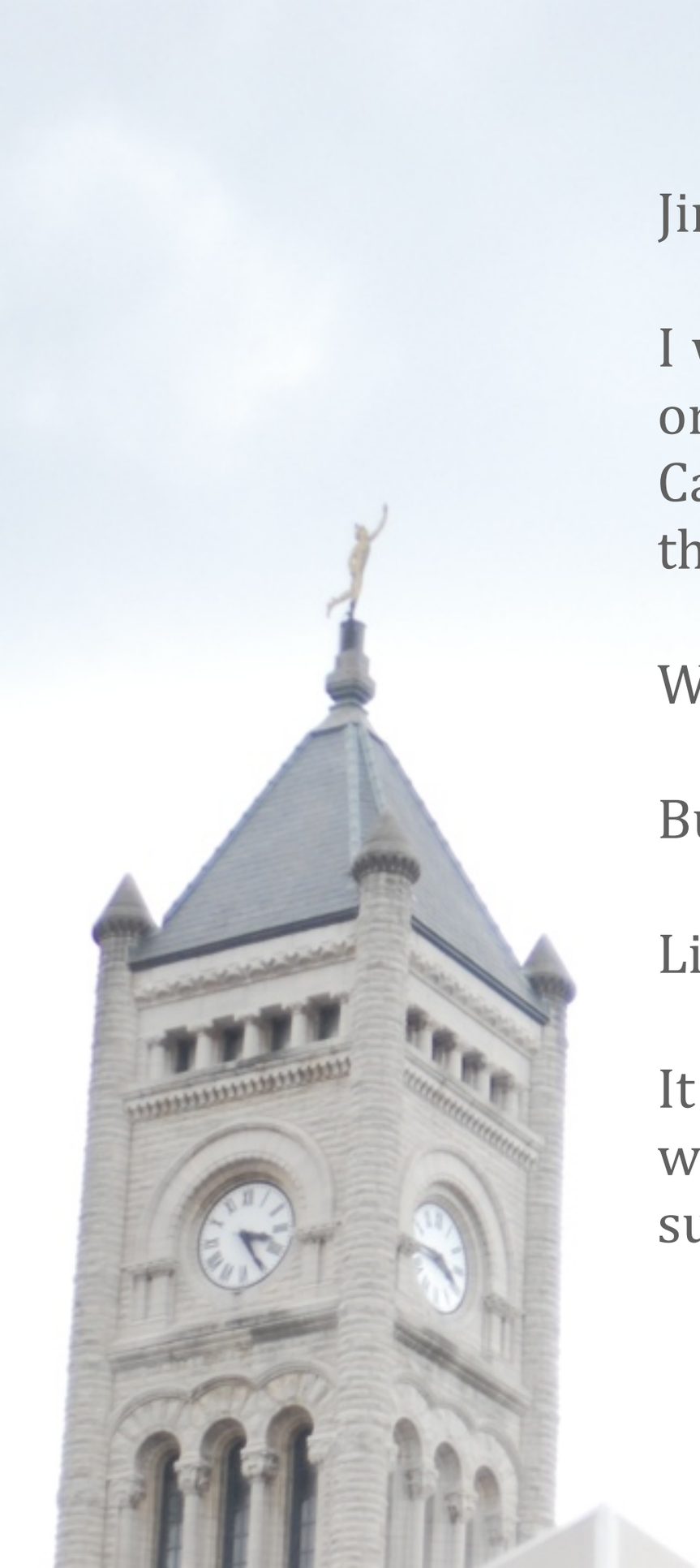
Learning to live like an artist means opening your eyes to where you are right now, to see who stands around you, and to uncover how you might offer what is most alive in you today into the life of someone else – for their benefit and God's glory.



Way One

Wherever you are, be all there.

Jim Elliot



Jim Elliot said *Wherever you are, be all there.*

I want to argue with him – when I'm cleaning the toilet or standing in line at the DMV or sitting in the Palliative Care Unit with someone I love – I don't want to be there.

Why would I? Why would you?

But living art does not mean loving where you are.

Living art means being where you are.

It means learning to see how God is there with you - whether that means heartbreak or elation, failure or success, painful darkness or hopeful light.

To live like
an artist means
to be fully yourself
in the presence
of others, no matter
where you are,
how you feel,
or what's
gone wrong.

Art Project

Is it possible to enter the place where you are today just as you are,
in a way that will surprise you, delight others, and bring glory to God?

Hold the minutes of this day in your hand, turn them over with the local paper,
carry them into the office, the cafeteria, the studio, the hospital, the classroom,
the factory, the restaurant, the bank.

Consider your daily activity without prefacing it with the word *just*.

I'm just doing laundry, carpooling kids, balancing the budget, sitting in a cubicle.
No justing is allowed - simply state what is true without discounting it.

What do you see? Who sits with you?
Who stands up for you? Who are you standing up for?
What is most true about you today - no matter how simple?

Today, give yourself permission to simply be where you are.

Way Two:

Use What You Have

Our son has a bin filled with blocks, another bin overflowing with legos, a clear bowl filled with crayons, and a stack of clean paper for cutting or coloring.

His choices are endless as are the possibility for creativity and invention.

But sometimes, the choice and possibility hover over him like a weight rather than a gift. Instead of feeling free, he feels bound.

I can see it in the stack of crumpled paper on the floor, art rejected because there was always a chance to start again.

I know exactly what he needs.

This boy needs some limits.

It sounds crazy, I know. Limits are what stifles our creativity, right? We need resources - *time, money, energy, favor*. Don't we?

If we want to rescue someone in danger, we send in the blazing lights, call the professional paramedics with their life-saving devices.

But to save the world, God sent a baby.

God -- who himself is time, power, love, and energy -- poured himself into skin and submitted himself to gravity and showed up, not just to live among us but became one of us himself. God, born in a stable. God, crying in the night. God, dependent on a young girl for his food.

God sends a drooling baby to perform the greatest rescue mission in history.

It was his most beautiful work of art.

Much of the beauty that arises in art comes from the struggle an artist wages with his limited medium.

Henri Matisse

If we show up with hands filled with perfection, then why would we need to think at all? What would it ever require of us?

A technician has missing pieces and can't continue a job. But in this life, you are not a technician. You are an artist.

Where desire and limitation intersect, there you will find the perfect opportunity for art.

Way Two

Our limits can be gifts if we let them be.

They might show up like failure, season of life, fatigue, disability, grief, burn out.

They might show up like lack of talent, time, money, or space.

But the limits tell us important things about ourselves.

Limits help us draw lines for margin.

Limits pave the way for vulnerability.

Limits remind us to be human.

Limits force us to invent, create, *make art*.

Befriend narrow limits. Let them be a reminder to you that your work and your art are impossible without divine resources.

Art Project

Take a few moments to consider your limits today.

Write them down and expose them in the presence of Jesus.

Admit to him what you know you can't do and consider the ways he might want to show up in you anyway.

When you become aware of these limitations today, mentally trade what you don't have with what you do. Write it out if it helps.

Today, use what you have to make art.

Way Three:

Practice Courage

On the first day you gave yourself permission to be where you are. Yesterday you decided to use what you have. After looking around at where you are and what you have, it might be easy to become discouraged.

You have a sick parent, an impossible to-do list, a daunting decision you don't want to make. You have a wayward child, a house that won't sell, a deadline you don't think you will meet.

But you have this one life and this right-now ground beneath your feet.

And you have been asked to show up today.

Maybe you have certain ideas about what it means to show up, to do your thing the right way.

Maybe you're a writer or a manager or a parent, but you are stuck in a pattern of defeat.

Maybe you teach in a public school classroom and your ideas of what it means to be a good teacher are keeping you from actually teaching.

Maybe you just got married and you have this idea about what a spouse is supposed to do and be and look like, but it isn't you and you don't know how to get there.

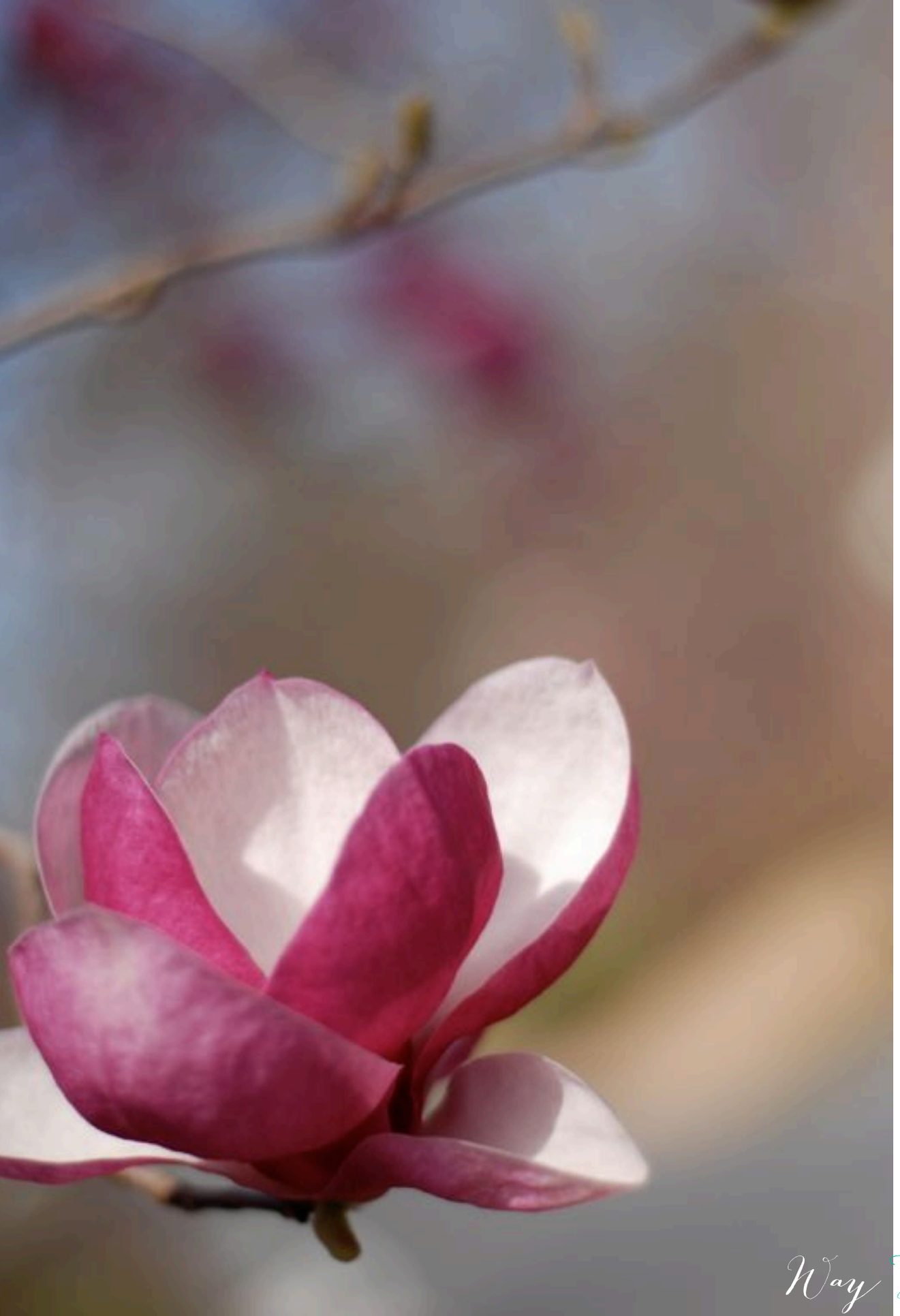
Showing up takes courage you don’t think you have.

One reason why it might be hard to show up is because you think you have to get rid of your limitations first. You think you have to wait until you feel ready or prepared.

But courage is not the absence of fear.

Courage is about more than simply believing in yourself, more than being confident and living life without fear. Courage, I’m discovering, happens in the deep and secret place of the spirit, the place where my life is joined with God’s.

True courage feels more like a gift than an award, more like a strength that doesn’t come from me. The more we live from who we really are, the more courage will grow.



Courage starts small.

Courage is shaking before the conversation but moving toward it anyway. Courage bows low with open hands and broken heart.

Sometimes courage hurts. It knows – *I can't do this on my own.* Courage comes back up after she sinks, brushes off knees after she falls.

You can't wait until you feel courageous to move. Sometimes you have to move even as you wait for the courage to come.

And then you realize courage shows up in the movement even in the midst of fear.

Show up
in the world
and be
who you
already are.

Art Project

Look around at the place where you sit today.

Are you in your home office with your coffee in hand? Are you reading these words from your phone on the train? In your car at a stoplight? Warm on your sofa? Boarding an airplane? Avoiding your assignments?

Wherever you are, what is on your mind?

What are you reluctant to face, to say, to believe?

Where are you hesitating?

Find a quiet space and speak these fears out loud.

Today, practice courage by admitting what you fear.

Way Four:

Cultivate Generosity

You show up in the day where you are, as you are.

You accept the tools you have to work with – your own unique blend of beauty, insecurity, ingenuity and weakness. This is your humanity shaped by the Divine hand of God.

But what can you do with this today, this moment?

This is movement that takes place on earth – ordinary, everyday, regular earth among ordinary, everyday, regular people.

You move toward your spouse in love, not because he deserves it, but because he bears the image of God and so do you.

You move toward your co-worker with forgiveness, not because she asked for it but because she bears the image of God and so do you.

You move toward your children with patience, not because it's easy but because they bear the image of God and so do you.

There may be fear in this movement, fear that you will give but not receive what you long for in return.

The job of the artist is to create, to honestly offer what she has without demanding a return on her investment.

Today, there is no hoarding.

Today, there is no manipulation.

Today, there is only art – the kind you make with your words and your choices. The kind of work you do and the type of attitude you bring.

All of this carries your own unique signature, unable to be repeated by anyone else.

Our gifts are not from God to us,
but from God through us to the world.

Janice Elsheimer

One way to practice generosity is to move when it's hard, to forgive when it hurts, and to offer even though you may not receive anything in return.

But there is another way to be generous, and this is one that may be easier to overlook.

What about those words only you can offer, those ideas that make you come alive, the desires you have tucked away for later?

What about your desire to host people, your love of words, your longing for story, that place in your soul only music can touch?

What about your quirky skill with fabric, that camera that sits dusty in the laundry room, the garden you long to tend in the spring?

What about your passion for business, your hands that itch to start something new, your soul that feels a pull to lead and shape something?

What if being generous has something to do with paying attention to what makes you come alive and then moving towards it? What if your exploration of these passions wasn't selfish but *sacred?*

Perhaps the most generous gift you could offer others is to become the person you most deeply are - and these secret longings play an important part.

Art Project

How would your life look different today if you offered yourself and your work in the presence of others without any strings attached?

What might Christ look like coming out of you, through the filter of your unique personality?

Write down five words that best represent your own unique offering. Keep them close and read them often.

Pray for the faith to believe they are true of you.

Today, begin to believe you have something to offer. Then find one small way to offer it.

Way Five:

Release Outcomes

There is always risk when we move towards others – the risk is that they won't move back towards us.

And so offering yourself generously feels counter-intuitive, and in a way it is.

There are no guarantees here.

But guarantees only come with outline living. And this life isn't an outline, this life is a masterpiece – full color, wavy lines, unpredictable weather, no RSVP required.

You just show up as you are with what you have to offer.

Today, it might not be much. But you have a choice, you know. You can come with dread and doubt. Or you can come with hope.

Not a hope that all we be well or that your work will have the desired outcome.

Hope that you will be okay even if everything you touch crumbles today.

Hope in a bigger picture than the one you can see.

Never tire of doing even the smallest things for Him, because He isn't impressed so much with the dimensions of our work as with the love in which it is done.

Brother Lawrence

When you offer your work to God, you offer it all – both the work itself and the impact of that work in the world.

Like the boy with the loaves and fishes – you don't get to say how many lunches it yields. If you did, your guess would be too small anyway, based on logic and experience.

Your resources are limited. God's are Divine.

Offer your small work to God in the presence of others and release the outcomes into his capable hands.

Art Project

This might be the hardest one of all.

In previous art projects, you've answered the following questions:

- What is most true about you today?
- What are your limitations?
- Where are you hesitating?
- What are 5 words that most represent your own unique offering?

Find a quiet place to answer these questions again today.

If possible, state your answers out loud, this time with your hands physically open on your lap.

Today, show up as you are with what you have to offer, releasing every outcome in the presence of Christ.

Way Six:

Rehearse Wonder

I spent some time on Google maps looking up the distance from home to a city we would be visiting soon. But I'm a little bit obsessed with maps so I started to search for images of other interesting destinations and landmarks.

Way Six

Navy pier.

The Statue of Liberty.

Mt. Everest.

With the satellite and street view, you can take a virtual tour of nearly any civilized place in the world.

I spent way too long being curious with the map, which may be why, as I fell asleep that night, I was jolted awake with this odd, dream-like thought: *we live on a gigantic ball!?*

Sometimes I feel so smart with my plans and my agendas. I hold on to my grudges and my defenses and have valid reasons why my way is the right way.

But then I remember God put us all on a gigantic ball suspended in the middle of darkness.

He sent it traveling through space at sixty-seven thousand miles per hour.

Around a massive *ball of fire*.

Then, he set it spinning.

Hold on to your hat, kids.

Why didn't he just make the land flat? Why a ball? Why a spinning ball? Why a spinning, moving ball that travels through space?

Why space?!

Suddenly all of my Very Important Plans and my Black and White Knowing of Everything feels small, arrogant, and inconsequential.

I cannot stop this world from spinning, and I can't make it start either.

See the wonder of your life on this spinning ball traveling through space. Your part is small, but it is *your part.* Still, you are not in control. Let this be a relief rather than a frustration.

Every meal, walk, scene, and conversation is laced with wonder.

But they are also threaded thick with potential for sacrifice.

Embracing wonder is not easy.

We want to make art but life can look so artless.

I don't have time for wonder, we say, *I have to check my email.*

Embracing wonder is for the fighters.

Wonder slows you down to remember what you're made for:
To be human.
To be small.
To reflect the glory of God.

Way Six

Art Project

Today, your art project is simple to explain yet potentially difficult to practice.

For a set period of time today, don't check one box or make one list. If you can do this for a whole day, even better.

Think of one activity you enjoy but consider a waste of time. Then do it on purpose.

Today, rehearse wonder.

Way Seven:

Let Things Grow

They ran out to the front yard, apple seeds in hand, hope growing large in their hearts.

I watched from the window as they dropped those seeds from their after school snack into the small hole in the front yard.

When they covered the hole there was nothing left to do but wait. And that is what they did.

They stood and watched, visions of a tall apple tree sprouting up by breakfast.

They stood vigil to that little mound in the ground, willing it to breathe.

Here is where we poured our hope and here is where we'll wait for it to grow.

Sometimes we dig, we plant, and we water. But we never see the growth.

Instead of action, our art becomes a discipline of waiting.

This waiting can hurt.

Our vocation is an asset to prayer because our work *becomes* prayer. It is prayer in action. The artist, the novelist, the surgeon, the plumber, the secretary, the lawyer, the homemaker, the farmer, the teacher–all are praying by offering their work up to God.

Richard Foster

Part of living life as an artist means moving to the rhythm of the Spirit of God. And sometimes that rhythm looks a lot like standing still.

As you consider what it will look like for you specifically to make and live out your art, know that living your life in Christ as a fully alive image bearer won't always produce the results you long for.

But there is freedom in making art anyway, regardless of salary, accolades, attention, progress, success, or any other outcome you might want.

Way Seven

Do you have lofty ideas of what this art-making will require?

Maybe you tend to be an all-or-nothing person, thinking that if you don't have time to finish something or to do it perfectly, then it isn't worth doing.

But small movements count.
Showing up scared counts.
Admitting your questions counts.
Waiting with hope counts.
Little offerings count.
Listening in the silence counts.
Finding courage in the midst of fear counts.

Measurable results don't always determine the success of something.

And so you dare to show up today, offering whatever you have as your right-now act of worship.

Way Seven

Art Project

In your fear, your questions, and your longing for expected outcomes, making art today may simply mean this:

Decide to sit with your questions rather than fight for answers.

When anxiety about the future sneaks into the back door of your mind, don't fall into fear but lean in to hope.

If it helps, physically lean back when the fears come to mind. No one has to know why.

Today, lean back into the presence of Christ, trusting him with every outcome.

final Thoughts

If you read one way per day, then it's been a week now since you started.

I hope you're beginning to see your life less like a list and more like a lyric.

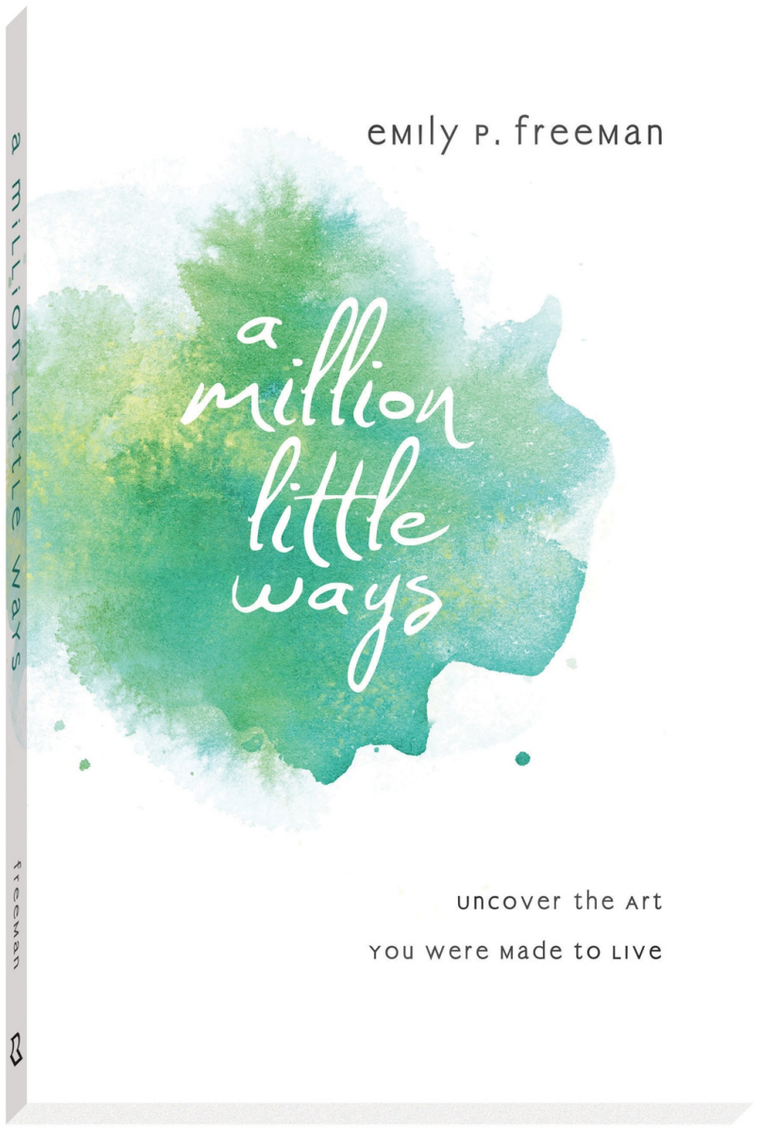
I hope you're becoming more aware of how ordinary moments are packed with artistic potential.

I hope you are slower to begrudge your limitations and more likely to use them as opportunities to make art.

I hope you are becoming more fully yourself in the presence of others, for their benefit and God's glory.

We
will make
Art.

further reading



If you would like to further explore what it might mean for you to make art with your work and your life, pick up a copy of ***A Million Little Ways:*** *Uncover the Art You Were Made to Live* where I offer specific practices to help you uncover and release your unique art into the world.

You may also want to read a series I did on my blog called Made for This: 31 Days of Living Art.

about the author

I've been writing online at Chatting at the Sky for eight years. I have written three books including *A Million Little Ways.*

My husband John and I have three children and live in North Carolina - home of the Tarheels and the first flight and vinegar-based barbeque.

I'm deeply curious about the mystery of Christ, the gracefulness of the everyday, and the sacredness of our inner lives. I'm also emotionally allergic to small talk.

Have a question or want to connect? You can find me on my blog, Chatting at the Sky, Twitter, Instagram or email: emily@chattingatthesky.com.

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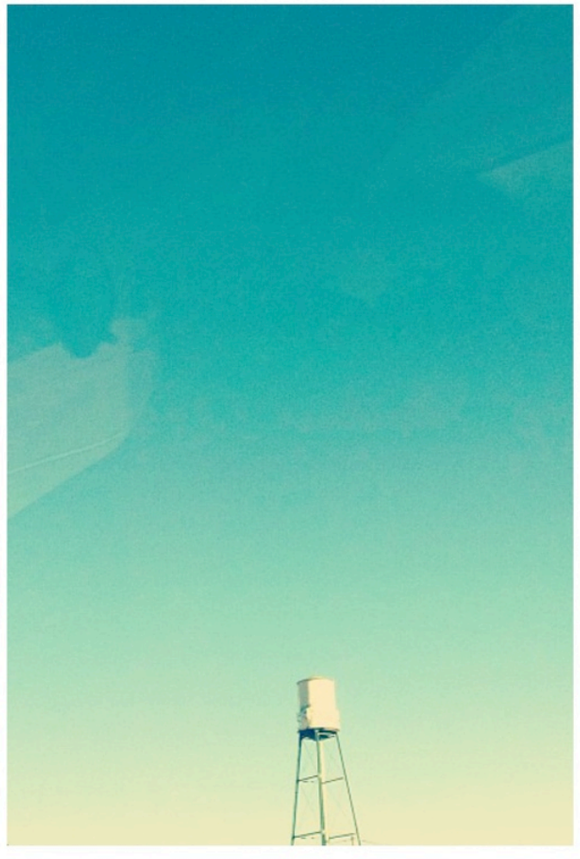
Here's to living art in a million little ways.



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