

# *beginning a sketch journal*

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We are a visual people. Since the dawn of time we have communicated with images, whether the elegantly expressive cave figures at Lascaux, France, the oddly meaningful spirals at Newgrange in Ireland, or the mysterious symbols carved in redrock cliffs in the desert Southwest. Spirals, antlered figures or Kokopelli, the mischievous, humpbacked flute-player, all express their own stories, whether historical or spiritual—or both.

Symbols and images allow us to communicate with each other, but they also allow us to create a personal record for ourselves, a record that has a power like nothing else. They are the story of our lives in visual form, wellsprings of memory and emotion.

The symbols we make for ourselves can touch us in a way that external images--those created by others--never can. We invent or discover our own visual, inner “language,” and although we may choose to share it with others or not, its most important function, at bottom, is to provide a key to our inner selves.

There is no need to be intimidated by all this, even if you have never considered yourself an “artist.” Who are you trying to please, in the pages of your own personal journal? It’s not necessary to create great art, worthy of hanging on the walls of the Louvre. You may, you may not—it doesn’t matter. What DOES matter is what these images express to *you*. What they remind you of. How they make you feel. What they mean, in the private mirror of your soul.

Don't allow the inner critic to spoil your endeavors, if you are unused to making art as an adult. When we were young, almost all of us knew how to create meaningful personal images. Look at any child's drawing—you may not be able to tell what it is, but if you ask the young artist you will get a firm and definite answer, nine times out of ten. Think about it—how often have you heard a child say “I don't know,” or “it's nothing” when asked about a drawing just completed? Instead, you will hear “It's my house,” or “mama and daddy,” or an elephant, the family dog, or a horse. Perhaps it's a tornado, a flower, or their school—but it is *something meaningful*, whether you can tell what it is or not.

The important thing is that whatever it is speaks to the *child*—as your drawings and sketches should do, to you. *You*, and no one else. They should bring you satisfaction and enjoyment, but unless you can successfully silence the Inner Critic, you may have difficulty. Have fun with it! Respect it. Pay attention to your own inner images. Don't criticize your efforts, don't compare them to anyone else's, don't expect them to look like a photo. You are working with your own set of images, unique to you alone.

## **What Should You Draw?**

That's a question only you can answer. In the pages of your journal, you can capture your life—you can slow the fleeting hours, explore your thoughts and dreams, plan a special trip and record it. You can study the life cycle of a single plant, if you are interested in gardening or nature. You can track the birth and growth of a child. You can combine image and poetry for an illuminated journal, in the fashion of the great early calligraphers of Celtic history. Draw the sun,

suggest the rain with a few diagonal strokes, make quick scribbles that resemble a flock of birds.

Draw your family dog, the new dress you want to design, the potted plant you got for Mother's Day. Draw the bird feeder outside your kitchen window. Draw your own hand.

## **Fear of Flying**

You may have bought a new journal, with laid paper and a leather cover, or a nice hardbound book, and you're reluctant to "spoil" it. Perhaps you find making those first marks a little frightening. Try the exercises with this article and you will get quickly past that.

I would not suggest buying one of those journals you sometimes see that come with illustrations on each page, guided meditations, thought for the day, or anything else not contributed by you, yourself--the person who owns and uses the journal. Those things can become intimidating or stultifying. You may not feel like exploring in words or images whatever is suggested, and if the page is already illustrated, why add your own? Better to have a completely blank book and fill it with whatever suits your fancy.

In fact, you may prefer to start with a relatively inexpensive bound book or sketchbook. I'd suggest a paper that doesn't have slick surface, since that can fight your drawing efforts, but if you haven't spent a fortune on this first book you will feel more adventurous about jumping in and making your mark.

Don't let the lack of fine drawing tools stop you, either. Grab anything in sight--the important thing is jumping in and doing it! I've used a #2 office pencil, a fiber-tipped pen from the discount store, a child's crayon, even a charred stick from the campfire if I've forgotten

something to draw with! What you use is nowhere near as important as *doing* it.

Use any medium you're comfortable or familiar with—that #2 pencil, charcoal, watercolor, colored pencil—whatever suits your mood or your fancy, and whatever is at hand! Don't wait to find some special tool—just keep whatever it is easily accessible, like your journal.

Having to take time to gather your materials sometimes breaks the mood entirely. If need be, keep several journals around the house, and one in the car, with a drawing instrument stuck in it—that way you're always ready. Continuity in a single book, though nice, is not always as important as *doing* it when the mood strikes.

## **Where There's a Will...**

### **Getting Past the Fear of White Paper**

People who don't consider themselves artists or haven't tried in years—or were intimidated sometime in the past by cruel (or well-meaning) critics—are sometimes intimidated by the idea of sketching in their journals, particularly if they have bought some lovely, expensive thing and don't want to “ruin” it.

In reality, you can't. This is your own, personal journal, to do with as you will.

- Remember how you doodle while talking on the phone—start with those same kinds of images. They don't intimidate you when you think of them as doodles--now think of them as symbols, instead. Consider what they may mean to you, or how they

may have been used in times past.

- Try a contour drawing...you may have done them in school. Look only at the object you're drawing, not the page, and pretend your pencil point is an ant, crawling along the object's contours. "Draw into" that outline instead of lifting your pencil from the page if you want to suggest details—but don't look at your paper! You can't expect yourself to have done great art, you weren't even looking—but you may find you captured something of the true essence of your subject nonetheless. And you'll remember the time spent in doing it--you will have had an intimate relationship with that subject while your drawing progressed.
- Draw your mood. Are you lighthearted, blue? Perhaps bubbly and happy? A group of quick squiggles like a flock of birds or butterflies might express that. If you're depressed, drawing that dark cloudy feeling may help you face it and rise above it...you'll remember what you were drawing, even if no one else can tell what it is.

With each of these, make marginal notes explaining to yourself what you felt or meant...it helps "bring it back alive."

In the future, we will explore how to integrate the disparate parts of your life—the visual and verbal, the inner and the outer, the artist within and the keeper of words. Now that we've laid the foundation, you're on your way to a joyful discipline that will last your whole life long.

*\*\*This was originally written for Personal Journaling Magazine—for non-artists, but the advice stands!*