

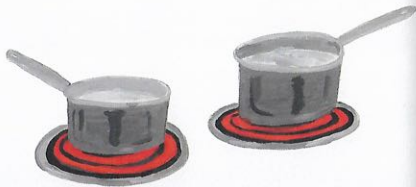
CHAPTER 3: LABELS ARE FOR CANNED PEACHES, NOT PEOPLE



Labels are sticky. They're great for organizing your cupboard; but when people put clingy, hard-to-remove labels on themselves, it can prevent creative growth. And sometimes labels have incorrect information! That's why what's *inside* the can matters. Your inner critic may have slapped on any number of labels: "Imposter," "Just a Mom," "Cubicle-Dweller," "Self-Taught Amateur," "Art School Dropout." It's time to get some warm, soapy water and start peeling those limiting labels off, so that we can see what's actually inside.

WARNING: THIS LABEL MAY STOP YOU BEFORE YOU START.

Before we talk about the contents of the canned goods, let's take a closer look at some of the most common labels. These are a handful of the stickiest culprits who, for some misguided reason, think they get to cover the entire surface of the can. Well, I'm sorry, but labels can't have that kind of real estate. You can be more than one thing at a time! You're not "just" a mom, a student, an accountant, a retired schoolteacher. You're so many things—including creative. Let's take a peek at the fine print:



"I'm a parent."

This is big. But wearing this very important label doesn't mean that you can't be other things, too. Being a parent can be all-consuming. It can also be—it *will* also be—exhausting. And when you're consumed and exhausted, it's likely that your art practice or even all your creative urges will get pushed to the back burner. It's difficult to find time and energy for creative pursuits when you have your parental label on, but you will be a happier parent and a better one if you give yourself time and space to be a creative person, too. The key in this situation is speed! You don't have time for huge creative projects (don't worry, you will again), so finding quick hits of creativity is what you need. An Instagram a day is a great place to start, because let's face it, you probably have your phone out to take zillions of photos of those sweet little faces in your life. (There is a list of thirty jump-starter ideas in chapter 8 if you need a little help deciding what to photograph each day.)

Another thing that your artist's soul will thank you for: one hour a week that is just for you. Not one hour to catch up on errands, or sleep, but one hour to feed your creative needs. Ask your partner to stay with the kids, or get a sitter. *Now leave the house!* Spend that weekly hour in a place that inspires you creatively: a gallery, a beautiful bookshop, an artsy café, the beach. Bring a notebook and jot down any thoughts that come to mind. As the kids get older, these outings can happen more frequently and last longer. And then, when you emerge from the sleep-deprivation stage, you won't be starting from scratch—you will have enough of these inspiring hours under your belt that when you do have a bit more time, you'll be ready with an entire notebook full of starting points.

"I work in a cubicle."

This just in: You can be a creative person who also works in a cubicle. It's true. All sorts of people have "noncreative desk jobs" and are insanely creative the minute the clock strikes five. Whether you enjoy your day job or not, making time and space to be creative will bring you joy. You are probably tired at the end of a long day, and the weight of your "I work in a cubicle" label may be dragging you down, but it should not be used as an excuse. It's as simple as this: If you want to create, make time to create. Schedule it. Use the program you book meetings with to book creative meetings with yourself. Thirty minutes a day, one hour a day, whatever you can fit into that week. Mark Bradley-Shoup, a practicing artist and lecturer at the University of Tennessee, has some really smart advice for his students who are about to graduate. He tells them that, even once they have a full-time job, they also need to treat their studio practice like a job. It's not frivolous; it's important. He advises them to block off as many hours each week as can fit into their schedules, and then commit to being in the studio for that amount of time. No excuses. You show up on time for your desk job every day, and you need to show up on time for your creative life, too.

"I live in a tiny town."

Hey, me too! And also, who cares? Thanks to the Internet, the world has gotten a whole lot smaller. Publishers in New York can find you through your blog, and galleries in Paris can find you through your Instagram feed. I have to be honest: For a long time, I worried that I wouldn't be taken seriously as an artist or curator unless I lived in a cool loft in Brooklyn. As much as I love New York, that delusional excuse isn't even close to the truth. Can you imagine if every creative person in the world lived on the same corner of the planet? Different places give different perspectives. No matter where you are, own that perspective, and see it as a strength.

"It's too late."

You don't have to drop everything you've been doing for the last however many years, go back to college, write the next great fiction novel or paint a masterpiece for the Louvre by next week. Start by adding thirty minutes of creativity to each day. That may mean one drawing per day, one photo per day, or even plating the perfect meal each evening—whatever it is, make a tiny bit of time for this new creative endeavor. It may lead to an entirely new life that you didn't even know was waiting for you.

"I'm a fraud."

No matter what field you're in, you may feel this way; it doesn't apply only to the creative world. Any time you push yourself to do something new, something out of your comfort zone, you run the risk of feeling like a fraud or an imposter. What if people do find out that you weren't trained at the best culinary school in France? You just happen to be really good at making pastry. And this is not just an issue for self-taught people, either. Someone with a BFA in painting might feel like a giant imposter if he/she decided to take up photography, or wedding planning, or even art curating. I was walking around with a giant "Imposter" label on my forehead when I curated my first few shows. I don't have a PhD in curatorial studies; what if someone found out? They did.

No one cared. I worked hard and loved what I was doing, and, slowly but surely, the imposter label slid right off (maybe it was all the sweat). Ask for help, or fake it till you make it—either way will work. If you love what you're doing, keep doing it. Eventually you'll become an expert.

These are a few of the most common labels that we slap on and may have a hard time seeing beyond; but, as you will see, there is so much more to each of us than these one-liners. Acknowledging, and owning, these labels is the first step in transforming them from creativity-halting excuses into a fascinating part of your unique story: You may be a parent from a small town who is also an insanely talented painter, or a self-taught musician who works in a cubicle by day and plays in blues clubs at night. Decide which part of the fine print you're proud of and which bits are slowing you down. This is a description of you, after all. Make sure that *all* of your information is included and correct.



FRAUD

SCHOOL: TO GO OR NOT TO GO? THAT IS THE QUESTION.

These next two labels are *big*—so big, in fact, that they need their very own section. They are the source of much debate and many unfounded insecurities. Ready?

Self-Taught

Here's a question: How can teaching yourself something new be a bad thing? It shows gumption, drive, and a desire to learn—very admirable! So why do so many people treat "self-taught" like a four-letter word? I've heard very talented people say, "Well, I didn't go to school for this; it's just something I do on the side." So let me get this straight: If it didn't come with a certificate and a gold star, it doesn't count? That makes no sense. It sounds like an inner-criticism to me! Here's the thing, learning can happen anywhere if you are open to it—just look at self-taught greats Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, Ernest Hemingway, and Prince, to name just a few. It's important to remember that every great, in every field, started out knowing absolutely nothing.

**Formally Trained**

Getting a formal education in something that you're passionate about is an amazing gift to give yourself: years to focus on your work, surrounded by professors and peers to support your learning. Wonderful. But for some people, that diploma on the wall can act as a stop sign, holding them back from trying anything outside of what it says there. This even applies to people with BFAs under their belts. A highly educated, successful painter once told me: "I take photos, but I'm not a photographer—I mean, I didn't go to school for it or anything." If you have always gone the school route, and it's the way you feel most comfortable getting new skills, then embrace that. Sign up for classes, work with mentors, whatever works for you—but don't let that degree on the wall dictate your future.

There are pros and cons to each of these routes. I decided to get insights from two incredibly creative people, whose paths were very different. First, I spoke to Shauna Alterio—an insanelly creative artist and designer from Philadelphia. She and her husband, Stephen Loidolt, own a design business called Forage. They met while attending grad school at Cranbrook Academy of Art (coincidentally, the same school where Charles and Ray Eames met). I wanted to know if having an MFA affects the creative life she leads today. This is what Shauna had to say:

Danielle Krysa: What was the best thing that came out of your education?

Shauna Alterio: *Art school is a luxury that affords you time to do a lot of soul-searching guided by mentors and peers. I have a group of girls that I collaborated with while at the Kansas City Art Institute (BFA), and they helped me discover my voice as an artist and a woman. I've had professors that I didn't sync well with, and that struggle developed my determined nature. And then there are the mentors who change the way you see the world. I was lucky enough to have two of them, Francis Resendes and*

Carl Kurtz. They both recognized my crutches, my tricks of the trade, and pushed me outside of my comfort zone in a way that still impacts me today.

DK: What's the most important thing you've learned on your own, after your education, just by being creative every day?

SA: *Just do it. Stop thinking about it, planning for it, and daydreaming. Take action and make your own opportunities.*

DK: Do you have any advice for someone who is considering a BFA/MFA?

SA: *If it's the path for you, I think you know. There's no question, no rationalizing the lifelong debt—it's just what you have to do.*

DK: If you could do it all over again, would you go to art school?

SA: *Yes. Even with 100K in student loan debt, yes! It was my path—it's how I arrived to where I am today. It informed the person I am, my aesthetics, my approach to art and design. It's what I know. That doesn't mean it's the only way. It was just mine.*

"Take action and make your own opportunities." That is some great advice! Now, let's talk to someone with a totally different experience—someone who is self-taught and didn't even pick up a paintbrush until her early thirties. I spoke with artist and illustrator Lisa Congdon:

Danielle Krysa: What did you study in college?

Lisa Congdon: *I studied history, with an emphasis on recent American political history.*

DK: What made you decide to try art? Did you think (or hope) that it would become your career, or was it just for fun?

LC: *I was thirty-one when I first began dabbling in art making, and I did it as a kind of creative outlet outside of my job. I took some classes and really, really enjoyed the process of making art, from start to finish. It was the most satisfying thing I had ever done. However, it was just a hobby for me for about five years—and my work was pretty terrible, at least looking back on it now. During those first few years I never, ever imagined I could sell one*

thing, much less make a living. I look back at that time of my life and think about where I am now, more than a decade later, and it is sort of mind-boggling. But, about five years into it, I started getting inquiries about my work, about the stuff I was posting on Flickr and a blog that I kept at the time. I sold a few things here and there, though I never considered myself an artist. And then in 2005 I booked my first show, and everything changed. It was another five years before it was my full-time income, but that's when it all became a possibility.

DK: What do you wish you'd learned, when you first started making art full-time, that could have saved you a lot of trouble?

LC: *Get out of debt before you quit your day job, and do a good job at keeping your financial books. I know this isn't a sexy answer. But getting your financial ducks in a row is important, and I didn't do it soon enough. I did do it eventually—a few years into my full-time art making. But I wish I had done it before I took the leap and not after. It would have saved me so much grief. It's expensive being a full-time artist. For example, if you are a sole proprietor, you have to pay self-employment tax and you have to pay quarterly taxes based on the money you bring in. The more money you bring in (which is a goal), the more taxes you have to pay. You also have to pay for everything yourself. There is no boss to tell, "I need new paintbrushes." It's sort of like owning your own home compared to renting and having a landlord. Awesome, yes, but totally filled with responsibilities and expenses. And so not having debt is something I wish I had thought more about before quitting my job.*

DK: How do you feel about being "self-taught"? Have you always felt the same about it, or has your perspective changed over the years?

LC: *I feel totally fine about being self-taught now, but for a long time I didn't. I have embraced my nontraditional path (starting later in life, being self-taught), but at first I felt like an imposter. I have come to learn there is a term for that, Imposter Syndrome, and people from every field experience it. We think that despite our success we are just lucky or that we have deceived*

people somehow to believe our work is worthwhile. I feared I was going to get kicked out of the art club eventually, because I didn't go to RISD [Rhode Island School of Design] or have the right training, and that people would eventually wise up and call me a fraud. I felt like an imposter even after my work became well-known and was selling and I had a long roster of illustration clients. But eventually I wised up, and decided that this way of thinking was not productive and complete bullshit. And I am happy to say I do not feel like an imposter anymore. I value my self-taught-ness now. I see that it has allowed me so much freedom from feeling restricted by or scared of breaking "rules" that exist in the world of art and illustration. It has benefited me greatly!



DK: Have you found any mentors in your self-taught journey?

LC: *There were several people who encouraged me and gave me solid advice early on. My first illustration agent, Lilla Rogers, was one person who really mentored me when I was starting out. She taught me so much about the worlds of licensing and illustration. I will always value what she taught me, and I also value what a wonderful colleague and supporter she continues to*

be. My former studio-mate, painter Jamie Vasta, was also a great mentor to me. She had gone through rigorous art school training and was so knowledgeable about composition and technique and gave useful feedback on my paintings, in particular. She also asked me for feedback on her work, which made me feel so valid in a way no one had ever made me feel before. I owe so much to her as well. There are so many women, in particular, who have gone before me on this path and have been so generous with their time and knowledge.

DK: If you could do it all over again, would you go to art school?

LC: *Art school can be enormously valuable, but my life has been a magical mix of so many different experiences, and mostly I wouldn't trade that for anything. And now, in my forties, I have this thing that I love to do and that I can make a living at. It's given the second half of my life a meaning it wouldn't have had otherwise. Anyone who discovers a new skill or joy or talent later in life should see this as a gift, not a hindrance. So, I think my path was meant to be, just the way it was. Also, it's never too late for me to go back to get my MFA. Though I am not sure I'd ever be able to slow down enough to make that happen! For now, I'm very happy with what I'm doing and very happy with how I got here.*

Shauna and Lisa are both proof that "training" can come from so many different places. If you want to learn something new, go learn something new. Set yourself up to get this new skill in whichever way suits you best. You are what you know, regardless of when and where you did the learning.

THE SCHOOL OF LIFE

Regardless of whichever path you've chosen, completely self-taught or a formal education, there is a long, exciting road of learning that lies ahead. In the School of Life, there is no exam to pass or fail that deems you CREATIVE or NOT. Not only is there no exam, there is also no template to follow—you have to do what feels right to you, and creating your own path is not only perfectly

acceptable, it's also mandatory. There may not be a detailed map to follow, but there is one very simple, common thread that connects every successful creative person. Hard. Work.

"The only place where success comes before work is in the dictionary."

I love this quote. It's been attributed to many different people, from Mark Twain to football coach Vince Lombardi—but whoever coined it was right. Whichever path you choose, in order to find success you have to work hard, be committed, and never ever quit—even when your inner critic tells you to.

FILL THE CAN.

We've removed those sticky, incorrect labels. Now what? Time to look at the contents of this label-free can! Do you know what's in there? Are you a poet? A painter? A dancer? Maybe all of the above? There is a lot of fun in figuring that out. I have an assignment for you:

List five creative activities that you've always wanted to try—things for which you have no formal training. If you're writer, maybe it's painting. If you're a painter, perhaps it's weaving. Pick one and try it within the next seven days. Then repeat with another activity you've always wanted to do, and repeat until you've done all five. It's fine to start small. The Internet is rife with DIYs, training videos, etc. There are so many generous people out there willing to share what they know, so take advantage of that. The next step up from that would be online courses. These range in price and outcome, but there are a lot of them out there and they're worth looking into. (Keep in mind that some trickier mediums will require signing up for an actual, instructor-led course—no self-taught glassblowing please.)

NEW AND IMPROVED!

The old labels are gone, the can is full, and you've started to gather a complete list of ingredients that go into making you the creative person that you are. You now have a brand-new, custom-designed label that you can display proudly as you head down your own creative path. In Chapter 1: Everyone Is Creative, artist Trey Speegle explained how he began owning his creative title. Claiming the title you want (Artist, Writer, Musician, etc.) is a huge first step in living a creative life. Now that you've put on the correct label, own it. Be proud of your contents. During a block, or after getting some unhelpful criticism, you may be tempted to slap that old label back on. Don't. Show people this new and improved version, and let them know that you are so much more than just that old, sticky label.

