



ART IS FREEDOM

ERIK WAHL

Declaring “Art is Freedom” could be seen as just another catchy phrase or a good brand strategy, but it’s much more than that. In fact, it saved my life.

It freed me from a self-imposed prison and lifeless existence. It’s the mantra that appeared when I needed it most, when the vicious corporate cycle was taking its toll on me like a gushing leak in a boat, taking both me and my family down. In this cycle, I tried all the tricks, played all the games, and faked it ‘til I made it, but nothing was working. At thirty years of age, I had lost my job, my money, my future, and was on the brink of taking my wife and three boys to live in my parents’ basement. But, more importantly, and more dangerously, I had completely lost my will to continue, to attempt to rebuild. For some, freedom is external and joyously triumphant. For others, it is internal and elusive and can be hopelessly debilitating. This is how I knew what I feared the most... I had lost my freedom.

My story begins at an early age, when I was told by a well-meaning teacher that “art was not my strength.” And, unfortunately for my immediate future, I listened. I put down my crayons and paintbrushes and didn’t pick them up again for another twenty years. In the meantime, I became the poster child for educational excellence. I was calculated and precise. I was standardized and robotic. I was an impenetrable façade of no nonsense academic efficiency. I studied hard, memorized and regurgitated answers, and played by the rules. I concluded like most, that strong grades, a solid college education and a good conservative corporate job with predictable growth would be sufficient. The formula looks like this: Good grades + Good degrees = Good money and a good life. Good night.

Based on this formula, I entered the corporate world for the next ten years where I methodically angled for financial freedom. However, there was a growing sense that I was not free, that I was trapped in a self-imposed prison. I had a deep feeling that my soul was slipping out from under me. I sensed my true talents (whatever they were) were wasting away inside of me. Eventually, my carefully crafted house of cards (built with power, prestige, and possessions) that I had worked so hard to build up got hit by an unplanned gust of wind when the dot com bubble burst. I suffered a heartbreaking demise and my cards unexpectedly came crashing to the floor. I had witnessed others suffer setbacks, but was not prepared for one of my own. The cause that brings life to a halt takes different forms in different people. If you have not experienced one, just wait.

Now, I would like to tell you that I bravely picked myself up off the floor and soldiered on. But that isn't what happened. I became aware in my financial brokenness that I was imprisoned to my own myopic definition of success. I was not free. I was an addict, a corporate junkie, who was psychologically dependent on financial security. I did not know what success meant outside of a paycheck. For the sake of my family, I knew I had to keep moving forward, but I knew that playing it safe was no longer an option. It was time for me to get drastic in my search for freedom.

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During this time of self-reflection, frustration, and anger, I was determined to break free from the addiction of security that had lulled the passionate version of me to sleep. By intentionally going against the grain of this addiction, my early artist, the small child who was told he wasn't a very good artist, was awakened inside of me. Digging into my childlike desires, I poured myself into my art, painting and writing with reckless abandon, all while spending additional time in the local artistic community. The pursuit of Art became my restoration. It was the passion I had chosen to give up on so long ago, in the form of a paintbrush. I was surprised to learn the answer was so simple. Frankly, this feeling of wholeness I was experiencing felt otherworldly.

My name is Erik Wahl, and Art has saved me from a life of slavery. I've been a member of A.A. (Artists Anonymous) for over twelve years. I am a recovering suit and tie. I am recuperating from years as a gear in a wheel that barely touched the ground. And now, after rediscovering my Art by freeing my mind and digging to find my inner creative genius, I am a proud survivor of "standardized education."

I found a new path. I learned to UNthink. I learned how to unleash my creativity and unlock my mind to find freedom.

In my search for freedom, I was unaware that "art" (actual paintbrushes and paints) would serve as my personal rehab as I began to rebuild from rock bottom. But during this deep search for real answers, I realized the term art had been misused for centuries. What originally began as a term defining the interaction between geniuses and muses eventually was morphed into a hierarchical description of taste and masterpieces.

"Art" became a product and "artist" became a career where, like any other job, you could succeed or fail. David Bayles explain this in his book, *Art & Fear*: **"Artist' has gradually become a form of identity which (as every artist knows) often carries with it as many drawbacks as benefits. Consider that if artist equals self, then when (inevitably) you make flawed art, you are a flawed person, and when (worse yet) you make no art, you are no person at all."**

When I was leaning on Art for my survival on my quest for self-discovery, I realized that the concept of an "artist" isn't much better than a plumber or a file clerk. But I knew the true meaning of Art goes much deeper than any final product or any career.

I believe Art represents the extraordinary form of genetic talent each of us are born with, as well as the ongoing fuel to declare this distinct expression every day. The nature of this primitive desire is so strong that when we use our artistic capacity we feel a strange empowering sense of completeness, of being at home within ourselves. You start to crave more of it, realizing this task is the single thing that makes you feel truly alive.

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I am positive you are familiar with this powerful desire, like a compass pointing you towards a future where your creative genius lays in wait. I believe the pursuit of your personal Art represents a one-of-a-kind path each one of us must take to engage our journeys. During my search for meaning I came across the writings of Viennese Psychologist and Philosopher Viktor Frankl, which affirmed my thinking that each one of us has a natural desire for this special type of art.

Dr. Frankl was an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist as well as a Holocaust survivor. He was the founder of logotherapy, which is a form of existential analysis. These new thoughts on the psychology of philosophical thinking were put to work in a psychiatric hospital, overlooking the treatment of 30,000 suicidal patients. Instead of offering them personal analysis, he gave them simple projects to be responsible for that affected their lives and the lives of those around them. Not one person who underwent this therapy ended up taking their own life.

When Dr. Frankl was put into a concentration camp, his title and his accomplishments in life were stripped from him. He watched as his family was removed from him and eventually killed. He observed how his cultural heritage was dismantled. Despite his personal hardships, he attempted to help other patients who wanted nothing more than death. He helplessly watched these terrible actions, and in the middle of this horror, he started to comprehend how any human could continue to live throughout this ongoing suffering.

After miraculously being set free from the camp, Viktor ruminated on his time there while refusing to speak publicly on it. Over time, however, he wrote *Man's Search for Meaning*, where he described the two main reasons why humans are capable of overcoming incredible adversity. The first is to continually pursue a “point on the horizon”—to be responsible for a project bigger than yourself. The second is a feeling of responsibility to protect another person or a group of people within your life.

Through very different circumstances, Viktor Frankl and I were arriving at similar conclusions. He gave words to my feelings of the two reasons why we lose our freedom. First, it happens when we are no longer content pursuing our unique creative horizon, a project that distinctly uses our talents. And second, when we select to turn inward as opposed to offering love and protection to those around us.

“I believe the degree to which we pursue our personal art is the level to which we will experience our personal freedom.”

Dr. Frankl had helped me form a new definition of what I was beginning to define as Art: an unstoppable yearning to create with our talents for those we love. When we give up on these two pursuits, to create and to love, we lose our Art. The loss of either of these elements slowly points us towards settling, which eventually leads to unhappiness. This unhappiness opens the door that allows the fog of deterioration to seep into our souls—a complete loss of our personal, creative freedom. More than ever, I believe the degree to which we pursue our personal art is the level to which we will experience our personal freedom.

This is why I believe that the pursuit of Art is Freedom.

We are all making constant decisions as we tell stories with our lives. I recently read that famous screenwriter John Guare said that every tale, including yours, has elements of two stories. The first is David & Goliath, the tale of the underdog overcoming his adversaries. The second is Romeo & Juliet, the tale of star-crossed lovers who fight, even until death, to be together. However, as the father of three boys, I admit I raised them on Pixar films which, in my opinion is one of the best storytelling companies ever- just slightly below God and Shakespeare. I still remember weeping through *WALL-E*, a lovable film about a miniature trash compactor that had somehow perfectly combined the previous two stories of all mankind, even without the words needed to communicate!

In *WALL-E*, we learn that humans have left Earth to become mindless consumers driven by massive companies taking advantage of them. Sound familiar? All that is left behind is WALL-E and his delightful post-apocalyptic cockroach. WALL-E has been assigned a task to accomplish; a directive. It is not glamorous, but he fulfills it because his motherboard, his sense of self, knows it is exactly what he was created to do. Packing trash is hard sometimes, but by completing his daily directive, he feels happy. Then, EVE, a robot pre-programmed to return to Earth and discover a living organism, shows up and WALL-E is smitten. He has found the second meaning of his life through another robot. The rest of the movie tells the story of WALL-E attempting to balance the two things he was manufactured to do; to create by completing his directive and to love.

Of course, it's a cute story, but we are not really all that different from WALL-E. Our motherboards gave us the same two reasons to exist. No matter the culture, location, or time, the purpose of all humans is to create and to dedicate ourselves to others, be it a person, a family, or a community. When either one of these elements jumps the tracks, our lives slowly start to deteriorate and our sense of freedom is lost. If we are honest with ourselves, I think we are all too familiar with this eroding feeling of decay. Lord knows I am...

WALL-E is a simple story of making this unbelievably difficult concept strikingly straightforward. The struggles we all face in life, at their core, mainly deal with our innate desire to live wholeheartedly in the moment, "to create" and "to love." To realize your unique calling to fulfill these two elements is your Art, and by focusing your everyday life on completing each of them has the ability to change your life.

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“When my daughter was about seven years old, she asked me one day what I did at work. I told her I worked at the college—that my job was to teach people how to draw. She stared back at me, incredulous, and said, “You mean they forget?” — HOWARD IKEMOTO, ARTIST

Many of us have forgotten “how to draw.” We have forgotten the path to express ourselves through completing our directives and our desires to love others.

I remember what life felt like when I forgot. It was misery. But since then, I have struggled to decipher my Art. My desire is to create the thing I know I was put on this planet to do, to communicate my passions and unshackle others from the similar chains that have, at one point or another, previously held each of us down. And the thing I love is, strangely enough, corporate America. Having been freed from its walls, I see opportunities to free my people, like (forgive the lofty analogy) Moses coming back to free the Israelites from Egypt. In every engagement I see frustrated individuals and managers who are desperately looking for freedom in all of the wrong places. I want to inspire hope by reminding them to break free from their shackles and start down their own journey to self-discovery.

Each morning when you wake up, think of WALL-E. You have been pre-programmed with a directive that you, and only you, can fulfill. It may not seem glamorous, but it is uniquely yours.

Do the work that has been given to you and be joyful knowing that you've mysteriously been given the artistic capabilities to fulfill your directive through new creations each and every day.

And when you fall asleep at night thinking of what tomorrow holds, recall your inner-Romeo or Juliet. Dream of opportunities to lavish your love on unsuspecting subjects—be it your spouse, family, co-workers, or even your target market. Discover those you honestly care for, and create with wild passion on their behalf. Your ability to love affects those around you, be they your spouse or a consumer who you'll never meet. Strive to be, against the cynicism of the world around us, a hopeless romantic with a heart full of love to create for those around you. Vincent Van Gogh, one of the greatest painters of his time, understood this. **“There is nothing more truly artistic than living in the moment and simply loving people,”** he said.

Your personal happiness is derived from your ability to create for those you love. This is what delivers your freedom. Your personal artistic DNA that was born into you offers you the chance to leave your artistic fingerprints all over this planet. Remember, you are responsible for telling your story, and if you don't, the world will miss out on your rare, unparalleled perspective.

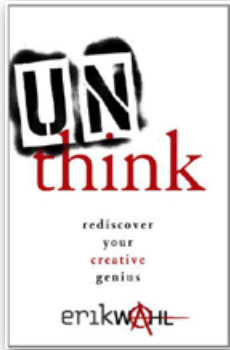
This is why I have dedicated my life to sharing this single special message. Through my work as a speaker, author, philanthropist, and a graffiti artist, but also as a husband to my wife, a father to my children, and a son to my parents, I see how Art continues to offer me freedom.

My personal journey to create and love has led me on the wildest adventure I could ever imagine. Your adventure still lies ahead of you. Remember the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald, when he said, **“I hope you live a life you’re proud of. If you find that you’re not, I hope you have the strength to start all over again.”** Don’t be afraid to start again.

I admit, and I take full responsibility, that my manifesto is an attempt to plot new capers and convince you your existence is an overflowing expression of your unique capacities to create and to love, to compel you into telling the one and only story you were given to tell. Your freedom will arrive, but only through much hardship and struggle—as it did for me. But do not give up. Hold tight to the words of artist and author Anne Lamott, as she reminds us of both what we have been given and, in turn, what is expected of us: **“The evidence is in you and you are the verdict.”** It is time to realize that Art is far more than a finished product or a job. Being an Artist consists of a whole new way to view the world. This is why I believe that the pursuit of Art, the quest to carry out your unique calling and to create for those you love, is the only way to discover your true freedom.

This is why I believe from the depths of my soul that Art is Freedom. 📖

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Erik Wahl is an artist, author, and entrepreneur who has become a catalyst for inspiring professionals to achieve extraordinary levels of performance. Internationally recognized as a thought provoking graffiti artist and one of the most sought-after speakers on the corporate lecture circuit, Wahl's process of creating "disruptive innovations" in both art and business has led to countless stories of breakthrough success. Wahl's artwork has raised millions of dollars for charities and can be seen hanging prominently in executive offices around the world. Erik, Tasha, and their three sons live in Southern California.

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