



Wrong Life: Notes on Falling Behind in Your Twenties

Jonathan Chan



Athirdtime



Athirdtime

Introduction

I wrote this for my incredibly talented and moderately burnt-out creative friends. These reminders came from conversations with the 'normal' people that I love and admire, as it seems that artists are not the only ones struggling to give themselves a break and mourn their younger selves. I realize that spending the time to write this book means potentially joining that category of privileged men who try to give advice and feel insightful online. Please know that I made these reminders mostly for myself, and I don't think any of this will save you from your unique situation. I'm just an advocate for feeling your feelings first, without judging yourself in the first 15 minutes. The 15 minutes will often pass by without you even noticing.



Sections

1. Notes on making bad art, often

- Page 7 - 41

2. Notes on leaving a good job

- Page 42 - 76

3. Notes on falling behind

- Page 77 - 111

4. Notes on the city you used to love

- Page 112 - 146

5. Notes on being your current self

- Page 147 - 182



For Merv and Nick





Athirdtime

Notes on making bad art, often

To the friend who is struggling to make things they love and be a human at the same time



"[George A. Sargent] himself remembered a therapist who said, 'George, you must realize that the world is a joke. There is no justice, everything is random. Only when you realize this will you understand how silly it is to take yourself seriously. There is no grand purpose to life. It just is.'"

-Viktor Frankl, "Man's Search for Meaning"



Artist lessons that also apply to your search for a normie day job:

- You don't get to be good at something until you're bad at it for a while.
- Each rejection is just one more step toward finding the right opportunity for you.
- You'll spend a lot of time thinking about things you should have said after the interview is over, but it's all useful for the next time you're in this position.
- You sometimes get the greatest opportunities by just throwing in a last-minute application that you didn't really think about.
- The opportunity that you desperately want is rarely as perfect a fit as you think.



How they tell you being an artist should feel:

- Like an aesthetically pleasing endeavour that leaves you feeling/looking/smelling nice.
- Like something that should come effortlessly whenever you have a spare moment.
- Never messy.
- Like it should be easily encapsulated by a well-designed IG graphic or a 60-second TikTok.
- Like something that should be easily understood by your immigrant grandparents.

How it feels to work on art that you actually care about:

- Like throwing mud at the wall and seeing what sticks.
- A lot like your logistical office job.
- Like wading through a pool of lukewarm paint when you hate the smell of paint.
- Like something that doesn't **need** to exist but you still need to get out of your head.
- Like maybe the high school bullies were right about your talents and that you'll suck forever.
- Like Russian Roulette but the bullet just makes you look kinda stupid instead of killing you.



Notes on cringing at your previous work:

- Where you are going is worth the discomfort.
- It's part of becoming a person you can live with being for the rest of your life.
- Your friends have been in this position as well, and you've barely thought about the mistakes they beat themselves up for.
- If you are cringe, you are safe.
- If you are cringe, so are we.
- If you are cringe, you are free.



What you think will happen when you make bad art:

- Everyone you know will secretly be judging your needless personal projects.
- “I will never financially recover from this” - Joe Exotic and also you, now.
- Every artist you love will line up to shame you.
- You will lose many followers, including the ones that you actually like.
- Your dignity as an artist and a human will be at risk.

What actually happens when you make bad art:

- You receive a data point on what is important to you.
- You receive a data point on what resonates with the people who follow you.
- Like 80% of people will keep scrolling.
- Like 2 strangers might unfollow you.
- The people who matter to you will continue to feel the exact same way about you.



Reasons to stop doing art in your late twenties:

- It's becoming increasingly likely that nothing you make will matter in the cosmic sense.
- People who are younger than you are already more successful than you could ever hope to be.
- Your classmates are buying houses and getting engaged.
- There are far more important things that deserve your stress and attention.
- It doesn't feel like it used to.

Reasons to make time for art in your late twenties:

- If it helps you stay sane, it's worth doing.
- It might reduce the chance of you blowing your savings on a luxury car in 10 years.
- It is a low-cost method to ensure that getting older doesn't mean losing yourself.
- At some point, you realize that even your most successful friends are just accumulating different combinations of wins and losses.
- The world can be ending, and your work can still make a difference to someone.



Reminders when focusing on the mistake in your most recent performance/draft/showing:

- Your friends have all made mistakes like these, and you didn't even notice until they pointed it out.
- At most, 3 people will ever know that you even made this mistake, and at least 2 of them will forget by this time next week.
- Mistakes make for a more memorable lesson than your success stories.
- The only person who asked for perfection is yourself. Everyone else is just happy to be here with you.



Things you tend to be overly critical about:

- Your unique talents and perspectives that you have had a lifetime to normalize.
- How much of a burden it is to talk about your life to others, especially when you find so much connection from helping them with their problems.
- How much space you actually take up by having human imperfections.
- How happy and successful you 'should' be at your age and level of class privilege.
- Your ability to give yourself credit and be grateful at the same time.



How you hope creative work gets done:

1. Get to a place where work and life will be manageable enough for hours of uninterrupted work in a week.
2. Start the work.
3. Finish the work.

How it actually gets done:

1. Notice the project you keep thinking about.
2. Sit on it for far too long until it hurts not to try doing it.
3. Languish in life distractions and other half-done side projects for a while.
4. Inconsistently come back to the work when you find small chunks of time.
5. Consider giving up.
6. Try again tomorrow.
7. Repeat steps 3-6 for longer than expected.



Things you accept as part of the creative process:

- Learning the skills through formal education, YouTube, and trial-and-error.
- Stressing until you create work that can generate enough money and social media engagement to sustain you.
- Putting the hours in at the cost of going out and spending time with good people.

Things that are also important to your creative process:

- Taking a day job that is far from your passion but can reasonably sustain the other parts of your life.
- Figuring out where your privilege intersects with how you make things.
- Taking time away from your work when nothing is getting done.
- Showing your work to another person, even if it sucks right now.



What a bad day can convince you to believe:

- That you are not living the 'right' life for you.
- That you made a mistake with what you **should** have been.
- You peaked a few years ago.
- you are locked into this situation for the rest of your life.
- The person you want to be is now inaccessible.

Things to remind yourself when you notice yourself spiralling:

- Everything that I am now grateful for was only attained through a fuckton of 'mistakes'.
- You're becoming the person you want to be. It just takes an ungodly amount of time and an uncomfortable amount of growth.
- What a blessing it is to see what doesn't work for you early on, and still have time to change course.



Notes on perfection:

- Nobody is really expecting it from you (other than yourself).
- Perfect things are easy to build up in your head until they cannot exist in the real world.
- Perfect work that never gets done is worse than a flawed and finished project.
- The pursuit of perfection can have both admirable intentions and destructive outcomes at the same time.
- You don't get to determine what is defined as 'perfect' for anyone else.



Reasons to believe in yourself, according to those cute IG therapy posts:

- You deserve it.
- Your loved ones want you to be happy.
- You can do anything you want if you ignore the many ways that you are privileged.

Reasons to believe in yourself, according to your unfiltered but wise friend:

- There's a mediocre white dude that's already doing what you dream about doing, and he's doing it worse.
- Making yourself smaller doesn't automatically uplift good people. It just gives more power to the judgemental and the stupid.
- It's better to try and fail instead of never trying. Never trying might lead you to become one of those losers that get into fights in the comments section.



Questions to ask when you notice yourself caring too much about what others are thinking:

- Would you still be doing this if there was no one to impress?
- If a people-pleasing version of you exists, would they be acting the way you are right now?
- Imagine the person that you DON'T want to be anymore - what would they do in this situation?
- What would you do if you pretended to be the best version of yourself?
- How do you want to remember this situation in 10 years?



Questions to ask when hesitating to post about it:

- Does it feel 70% good?
- Does it feel less than 70% good but you need to move on?
- Do you feel like you're forcing it?
- Will you keep thinking about it if you don't post about it?
- Have you already spent way too much time ruminating about this and you just need to get off your phone at this point?



What you hope performs well on social media:

- The work that you've been thinking about for the last few months.
- That really poignant art piece that made you feel like an actual artist.
- The post you made about making a life change that has been long overdue.
- The vulnerable post that you hope will help someone in your position.

What actually performs well on social media:

- That dumb fucking whatever that you almost didn't post.



Reminders when throwing your art into the internet ocean:

- The work that you are most proud of doesn't need to perform well.
- The work you spend the most time on doesn't need to change the world.
- The upload constraints of your selected social media platform are just another creative challenge.
- Someone will likely borrow from you in the way that you have borrowed from the ether.
- The internet is not lacking good content to consume, so don't put too much pressure on yourself.



What to remember when getting caught up in someone else's success:

- It's a worthwhile skill to practice being happy for other people. Everyone finds success and failure on staggered schedules.
- You can be a good friend and still be processing feelings of jealousy. It's hard to ignore the comparison machines on our phones.
- Your endgame isn't an envy-inducing social media post. The goal is to build a life you can tolerate when you go through a life-changing health scare.



Reminders when worrying about your internet self:

- People change more often than they post.
- High visibility doesn't always equate to wealth.
- The amount of likes you get is not the most important metric to evaluate your work. It is just the one that is most visible.
- Piling onto someone's public shaming incident is rarely the most productive use of your good intentions.
- Calling out someone's bad behaviour and doing the work to better yourself are not interchangeable.



Potential hazards that can trigger a downward spiral/creative rut:

- Stumbling upon a foreboding tweet about climate change.
- Seeing a post about someone doing very well in the area of life that you've been neglecting.
- Achieving a career milestone and finding that it doesn't feel like it's 'supposed' to.
- Any life change that moves you between exhaustion and anxiety.
- Moving to another city and finding that a lot of your problems have followed you there.



Notes on falling off creatively:

- Art will always be there when you want to pick it up again.
- You don't need to fully monetize your hobby just because you see someone doing it well on TikTok.
- Your followers may want more art, but the people who love you would rather see you eat hot meals regularly and get a decent amount of sleep.
- There will always be inspiring people on that platform you hate, but they may become harder to find.
- You're allowed to post subpar content if you have like 30 seconds of fun with it.



What success used to sound like:

- 10,000+ followers on Twitter.
- \$75,000+ after-tax income.
- Producing work that can earn free drinks at trendy restaurants.
- A large and conventionally attractive friend group.
- An ego-soothing amount of Instagram likes
- A Youtube-friendly morning routine.
- Envy of the people who did you wrong - high school enemies, indifferent professors, etc.

What the current version of success sounds like:

- A workplace that doesn't give you a nightly anxiety spike when I see an email notification.
- Enough time to work on your silly art projects.
- A shower with good water pressure.
- 7+ hours of sleep, four times a week.
- Money for therapy and fresh vegetables.



Things that you paid attention to when getting into photography:

- Learning what each Photoshop tool does.
- Properly pricing your work.
- Maintaining a professional but approachable online presence.
- Backing up your files 3 times over.

Things that are important to you as you step away from photography:

- Identifying where your privilege affects the kind of work you create.
- Focusing on just getting to the next day when you don't have mental room for being creative.
- Letting go of unsustainable work habits developed in university.
- Stepping away from the kinds of creative work that feel draining or predatory.



Reasons that magazine interviewees make art:

- It might save the world.
- It will honour the memory of their loved ones.
- It might change the minds of millions of people.

Equally valid reasons to make art:

- It'll be kinda funny.
- It's a Tuesday.
- You were thinking about this at work and working on it will help you sleep.
- It helps you feel like yourself.
- You need to get it out of your system before you turn 40.
- It might help someone who's going through something you survived.
- It's not perfect, but no one asked.



Things that you tend to undervalue:

- All of the reasons that your loved ones feel comfortable opening up to you.
- The parts of your job that an average person would mess up more often.
- The talents that are normal to you but you haven't seen anyone else do in the way that you do.
- The difficulties that other people have with understanding the people you get along with.
- Everything you've learned from your many past mistakes.



Things that don't prevent you from doing creative work:

- Living in a city that you hate.
- Working a deeply unsexy job but helps to meet your needs.
- Not having the approval of extended family members.

Things that are allowed to get in the way:

- Those days when you just need to focus on staying alive and moving your limbs.
- The work or school project that you didn't think would take THIS long.
- Those days when everything goes right but you're still exhausted.
- Spending time with someone that you don't want to take for granted.
- Spending time recovering from something that you've wanted for so long.



Reminders for going down a comparison spiral:

- On a long enough timeline, even the perfect people have something they regret doing/not doing.
- No one is without money problems. Most people just have money problems that are harder to talk about at a bar.
- The life you envy is a series of lucky breaks and narrow misses.
- The life you want will never be guaranteed, no matter how hard you work.
- Doing the right thing is rarely impressive, interesting, and easy all at the same time.



Reminders that feel like a relief:

- You can be an artist without calling yourself an artist.
- There is an immeasurable amount of good that you can do for others just by taking care of yourself.
- As you get older, you learn how to feel okay about yourself regardless of your productive output.

Reminders that your younger self doesn't want to hear:

- You can be misogynistic without thinking of yourself as a misogynist.
- Changing almost everything about yourself will do very little to change how people act toward you.
- You won't do everything you planned to by 30, and the things you do spend time on won't feel like how you imagined them.



Reminders for my STEM friends when they're being judgemental about art:

- Things don't need to have high technical difficulty in order to be meaningful.
- You don't need to understand art to like art.
- You will rarely meet people who have both the time to gatekeep art from you AND the required talent to do so.
- You're allowed to like things even if you have just heard of them.
- You're not a bad person if you don't care about art.
- Things aren't bad simply because they don't fit your taste.
- As long as it makes you feel something, it has done its job.



Some things to ask before starting that seemingly 'easy' creative project:

- If nobody cared, would you still do this?
- Will this matter next year?
- Does it feel like you're growing in that uncomfortable way?
- Would your younger self be curious about it?
- Would your older self regret not spending a bit of time on it?
- Would you be as interested in it if you couldn't post about it?
- If it fails, does it sound like a mistake you needed to make?



People you used to make art for:

- Cool new art friends.
- Future clients and employers.
- Anyone you want to impress.
- Your loved ones.

People you now want to make art for:

- Normies who are curious about your perspective.
- Strangers who think they are living the wrong life.
- Friends who did everything right and still aren't happy.
- People who are struggling but tell themselves they 'can't complain'.
- The 20-year-old version of yourself.



***"Live as if you were living already for the second time
and as if you had acted as wrongly as you are about to
act now."***

-Viktor Frankl, "Man's Search for Meaning"







Athirdtime