

Let
There
Be Art

The Pleasure and Purpose of
Unleashing the Creativity within You

RACHEL MARIE KANG

FOREWORD BY MORGAN HARPER NICHOLS



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The Pleasure and Purpose of Unleashing
the Creativity within You

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To my Creator:

Your works are the most magnificent.

Your art is the most astonishing.

I love you for your miracles,
and I love you for your mysteries.

All of this is *from* you, and *for* you.

Amen.



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Foreword

As many people before me have done, I've turned to writing in search of answers—or at least a sense of camaraderie in the black ink reflected back to me on the page. The words in that season felt like the equivalent of a baby's first steps out into the world. And somehow, all in grace, I found just enough courage to share these words online. I started sharing as a way of checking off the box of stepping into adulthood. I started sharing as a way of trying to find a way to breathe in the world. But then, I received so much more.

I received countless opportunities to practice courage. I received boundless grace that gave me the freedom to let art find its way through my heart, my hands, and out into the world. I also received true friendship. And one of those dearest friends from very early on in this journey is the author of this beautiful, timely book: Rachel Marie Kang.

I don't think it's any coincidence that Rachel and I first met through writing all those years ago. Writing is a practice that many people (such as myself) approached because we wondered if we might be alone in how we felt. Through this very medium, we begin to find belonging and the freedom to strengthen the muscle of having something to say—even if it means doing it while afraid.

When I decided to practice unleashing my creativity, I was one of those people who began to find that sense of belonging. Rachel was one of those friends who helped me find it.

Not too long ago, Rachel and I sat across from each other for lunch after we hadn't seen each other in person for years. However, despite the years and miles between us, it felt like we had just seen each other a few days ago. The last time we saw each other, we were living in different places, we weren't parents yet, we weren't published authors yet, and we hadn't learned how to live through a global pandemic. So much time had passed and yet, it felt like no time had passed at all because the stories, experiences, and creativity that connect us are not bound to time at all. This is the power of *Let There Be Art*. It's not just social media posts and books; it's a daily opportunity to be fully a part of creation—then join in on creating every day in subtle and grand ways.

I am so grateful for the friendship I share with Rachel, and I am also grateful for how it has become a grace-filled reminder of how wonderful it is when you live from a place of knowing you were made to create. You just never know what will happen when you finally allow all that has been stirring within you to come to life. You can never know who you will meet, what new things will be revealed to you, and how you will grow. But you can know this: it matters to come forth into the light. It matters to spend time exploring and nurturing the creative within and, as Rachel says, to “join God in creating.” This book will help you do just that. Now is the time to create. Now is the time to join in. There is so much waiting to be revealed to you within these pages and beyond.

*Morgan Harper Nichols, artist, poet, and author of
All Along You Were Blooming and Peace Is a Practice*

Invitation

May Your Light Break Forth

The idea for this book came in the dark of night while nursing my newborn and crying into my shoulder from sheer exhaustion. The pitching of this book came while pregnant in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, while all the world was cradling a collective trauma—the shared sorrows that came in the moments and months following the unjust death of George Floyd. The writing of this book came in the endless weeks spent oscillating from doctor to doctor, swimming in a sea of unseen symptoms caused by a nodule in my neck, wreaking havoc on my health.

When *you* finally find yourself ready to sit down at your desk to write, or in that studio to paint, or in that sanctuary to speak, or at that sunrise wedding to photograph, or on that stage to dance, or in that shed to make, or in your living room to play piano, or in that classroom to theorize, or in your kitchen to chop thyme or cilantro or parsley or any other herb you need to make that recipe from your grandmother’s treasured cookbook, or wherever it is that you stand or kneel or walk or sit

to create and cause beauty to be and beam from the hollow of your hands—you will find that everything, and I mean *everything*, will rise up against you.

Every holy, hard, and impossible thing will rise up to greet you, will shake hands with you, will remind you of the painful truth that has been true of every beautifully created being since the beginning of time.

The truth is that none of this is easy—none of our living, none of our loving, and certainly none of our longing to create. You will come to question, just like I have, if it really is the right time to consider writing a book, or taking up pottery, or plotting a garden, or homeschooling your children between the small walls of your borrowed home.

You will question, just like I have, if it is okay to say that you are a maker, or a writer, or an artist, or the ever-elusive creative, whatever in the world that means. You will question whether the work of your hands has worth, whether you can call the things you do and make *art*, and whether you really can claim that all of it is meaningful and irrevocably needed by others.

I imagined you would find yourself in this curious place of questioning. In a place of wondering if the cosmos really is parting wide open and welcoming you to partake in the age-old practice of wielding wonder and making things. I knew that you would find yourself in a place of wanting to make things, not merely for the sake of making a name for yourself, but more so for the fact that not doing so might reduce you to an exhale, a breath that came into this world and quickly departed.

I knew that you might sometime find yourself in a place of pondering the possibility that your existence on this tilting planet may be less about making a mark on this world and more about having a mark made in *you*.

For whatever reason, however inconspicuously the thoughts came seeping in, there is a deeply embedded string of beliefs that you, that we all—collectively—have come to accept as truth. We've come to believe that meaningful things come easy and that beautiful things can only come from an elite few. That pretty poems can only come from the pens of published poets. That a ballerina can only practice pliés for the sake of perfection but not for sheer pleasure. That breathtaking concertos can only come from Brahms and Bach but not from the skilled hands of contemporary composers.

I do not know why I rise and wake with a desire deep down in my soul to dismantle these beliefs, to join with those who have gone before me—Makoto Fujimura, Madeleine L'Engle, Andrew Peterson, Sho Baraka—and attempt to unravel the many ways we've succumbed to living like there is any reason to believe that beautiful, meaningful, honest things—*that art*—cannot, in fact, rise up from that which is broken, imperfect, unseen, or unsure.

The truth is, I cannot tell you why the lungs within you heave with weakness. I cannot tell you why the life growing within you could not become bones and body enough to sustain breath. I cannot tell you why the gut-wrenching loneliness that you feel steals your hope, why the hurt burns so bad that you can barely lift your body from the couch to live another day.

Nor can I tell you why palettes of paint speak to you, why it always seems to be that nature calls out to you, like some grand invitation. I cannot tell you why you feel alive, so impossibly alive, when you sing, or bake, or tell stories in auditoriums before one hundred eager hearts. I cannot tell you how and why these swells of grief and joy come to you the way that they do.

I can only tell you how to make the most of them, how to make the most of what you know and who you are. I can tell

you that, in the grand scheme of things, it really does matter to see the work of your hands as worthy.

It matters to believe that every journal entry, every captured photograph, every scale practiced, and every letter penned drip and drown with more weight and wonder than you will ever come to possibly imagine or understand.

In his book *Creativity*, the late Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi talks about the ancient Roman saying *libri aut liberi*, which conveys the inevitable and difficult choice between living to raise children or living to write books.¹ This saying memorializes a cultural concept that still exists today and implies the impossibility of successfully centering one's own life around creativity *as well as* family, community, intimacy, and legacy. This way of thinking, so ancient and yet still prevalent today, begs us to believe that the way of creativity is quintessential and clean—that it cannot be a collision of all that is hard and hopeful.

I have pondered this ancient saying, have thought deeply and widely about it, looking at my own life and the lives of those I know and love. I see the many ways that we sketch, self-publish books, try new recipes, create costumes from scratch, and build businesses with our bare hands.

All of this, while simultaneously tending to children, tending to careers, and tending to lists and needs and aches and ailments that pull at us from every which way.

When I see these chaotic collisions, I cannot help but say that *this* is how it's meant to be. It's never going to be *libri aut liberi*, one or the other. It's never going to be easy without the hard, joyful without the grief, magical without the mundane, light without the dark, or art without the struggle.

In your creating, even in your enjoyment of what *others* create, there will always be wars to wage and work to do—fears

to fend off, children or communities to care for, lies to unlearn, and evil to overcome.

I see you now, coming to the last line of the last chapter, turning loose the last page and releasing yourself from the spell and spine of this book. I see you sighing with relief and then saying to yourself that it is time to step into a new place. A place of permission, a place of embracing. A place of cultivating the courage to speak into the void of your own heart. A place in which you find yourself professing and proclaiming your acceptance of all the dreams and words and ideas that swell within.

I imagine you returning to this book, time and time again, to be reminded of all the ways that creativity lends itself to you. In these pages, you will find a woven tapestry of quotes and references to art in its various forms. You will find fragments of my story, creative writing, and the unraveling of biblical truths.

It is not enough to simply share my story, however. It is not even enough for Bible verses to be peppered in and through these pages. For the words in this book to sink in deep, they must be felt, seen, tasted, and heard. After all, art itself is tangible—incarnate.

Therefore, this book must *show* as much as it tells.

For this very reason, you will find poems and pieces by people I admire, as well as people who are a part of my online creative community, Fallow Ink. Like paint on canvas, these poems and pieces give color to the concepts this book explores.

Might the words in this book read like a play on a stage, like a curtain being pulled open ever so gently, leaving you to see something so spectacular that you can't help but walk away singing the songs, can't help but walk away changed.

Use these prompts to prick your heart to think and feel. Let them stir the ideas, stories, and truths within you. Answer these

prompts any way that you wish. Write about them in a journal or share your thoughts in a post online. Let inspiration lead you to create a recipe, to write letters to your grandparents or children, to read a new fiction book, to start singing, to create characters, and to write scripts. Let the answering of these prompts awaken a new day, a new world within you—or, perhaps, an old world begging to come to life again.

This is a kaleidoscopic call, a wild and messy welcome for you to let light break forth from every darkest corner, for a new dawn to rise over any shadow of darkness in your heart, in your home, in your life, and in this world.

For the sake of irresistible pleasure and irrevocable purpose, *create* with me and *come* with me to heed and hear the call to let there be art.

You are not just a body of bones and blood and breath,
you are a heart bending to hear,
you are a soul straining to see something
beautiful in the midst of all that breaks.

And, there will never be enough time or courage or certainty
to write out all you wonder about,
to make art of all you sense and see.

But there is faith.

There is showing up, anyway.
There is standing before the canvas,
or the computer, or the clay
even when you feel rushed and unsure,
bruised and broken.

Even while you are seeking and stumbling,
fumbling to find your way through.

Invitation

And, this is bravery.

That you might come to call this kind of
breathtaking curiosity, beautiful.

That you might dare call it creativity,
dare call this swell of wonder within you
art.

Let There Be Bareness

Write what disturbs you, what you fear, what you have not been willing to speak about. Be willing to be split open.

—Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*

There I am, in that four-by-six-inch frame forever etched in my mind. A brown girl, standing under a sun-stretched sky, seeing clear through the bright of it, staring deep into the burn of it.

It is Easter.

And I am clutching a brown, boxed-up bunny. But beneath the hand-stitched dress is a candy-coated bitter of my own—a boxed-up beating heart banging on the bones of my rib cage.

There, in that 1997 Kodak memory, I am not just the girl with chocolate; I am the girl with *a lot*. The girl who carries a lot. The girl who questions a lot. The girl who can't help but see that her lot in life is always an asking, but never an answering. Never a knowing, never a clearing of the confusion that fills up every crevice of her childlike, need-to-know soul.

I was just a young girl when I learned how to see brokenness more than any other thing.

I looked for it, even when I could not name it—in the ruin of run-down buildings, in flowers faltering and failing to bloom. I did more than just see brokenness. I *sensed* it, could feel it sweeping around me, seeping in and out of me. The young girl that I was, so good at gathering broken things and burying them deep within, until I was no longer just beholding brokenness, but it was beholding me.

Brokenness *becoming* me.

This is the beginning I remember. My seven-year-old soul, already giving in to the lie that life always leaves the living lost, lifeless, and without light. Already bending to believe the worst about the world and the worst about the ones she loved.

Even, especially, the worst about herself.

But this is all of our beginnings, is it not? We all come breaking out through birth—all baby breath and broken cries—desperate and in need of someone to hold our heaving, heavy selves. We come out crying into the chaos of our world, wary with the inhale of brokenness, the heavy birthright that it seems to be.

“There isn’t one of us who isn’t cut right from the beginning,” writes Ann Voskamp. “All of us get pushed from safe wombs out into this holy mess. All of us need someone to catch us and hold us right from the beginning, and for one sacred moment, every single one of us is cupped. And then they cut that one thick umbilical cord. You can spend a lifetime feeling pushed out, cut off, abandoned—inexplicably alone.”¹

All of this is true, all of us are born into this brokenness. All of us are birthed and brought into this earth of inevitable darkness, a darkness that burns beneath the bone.

A story that began before man's first breath was ever an exhale.

You already know the story of a serpent hissing whispers of shame, of the forbidden fruit and the inevitable fall of man. So, instead of telling you about the woman and man taking a bite and indelibly breaking the heart of God, I will tell you the story of *God's* breaking—of God breaking up the darkness and bringing forth light.

It's the story of God staring out into an abyss, a great, magnificent nothing, to which he speaks, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3). Time and space stand still as he wills the suspension of celestial light to push back the boundaries of darkness.

He laces land around the wild waters, calls the work of his hands *good*, and readies the world to sustain life while this new light shines forth.

It is *here*, long before our breath and bodies came into being, where our stories begin. It is *here*, where the looming possibility of the incredibly hard and terrible things that happen in our lives first lingers.

Our story first begins with the fold of darkness, not with the forbidden fruit and the inevitable fall. Our story begins when God creates boundaries to contain and control the darkness and the deep. It begins with the world that God calls *good* but that he still allows to remain with "a sense of wildness and chaos that must yet be controlled."²

God, in his infinite power, plans a partnership with man in this work of pushing back the darkness, long before he even breathes life into man's lungs.

Jeffery M. Leonard, PhD, Hebrew Bible scholar and associate professor of Biblical Studies at Samford University, writes that

“God charges humankind with taking up the divine mantle of creating and working to push back the boundaries of this chaos still further.”³

It is within this tension, this controlled chaos that has not been completely cast away, that God ultimately initiates *tikkun olam*, a Judaic concept that defines this tension as God’s purpose of leaving room for repair in this world. A plan that God invites us to participate in, a work of pushing back the darkness in this world, of tending to this wild planet, of tending to our own wild hearts, and of being a part of restoring all things to the way they could and should be.

To peace.

God’s plan wasn’t simply to save us from the inevitability of sin. His desire all along was that we would live and long to push back the darkness, *just like him*, forever holding our gaze upon *his* goodness and *his* great light.

The truth about the creation story is that man was not the only one to fall into temptation. Beneath the story of man’s fall into sin is that of Satan’s—an angelic being created by God to shine with light and goodness who, instead of pushing back the darkness in his own heart, gives way to it.

Then, darkness begets.

Eve, the tempted, becomes the temptress.

When faced with the choice of life and light or death and disunion with God, she and Adam stand there, two bodies, bare and unbelieving. They forsake faith and they bite into the fruit. They fall with the fate of every human heart on their fingers.

They didn’t just break a set of rules.

They broke their hearts open to Satan’s unbounded way of being. They broke their hearts wide open to a way of life that

pushes back the light and love of God instead of pushing back the dark *with* God.

Brokenness wasn't our beginning. We began as breath bound to the heartbeat of God.

We were not damned from the beginning. Darkness was.

We were not bad and broken from the beginning. We were believed in from the beginning.

We began, not prone to wander but prone to worship.

Our natural-born bent wasn't for sin and sorrow. It was for the sound and the song of God.

But there, in the garden, we traded the sound and song of God, the whispering of his love, for the wrenching lie of Satan. And the broken pieces in us have been straining to hear and know the difference between the two ever since.

It is no wonder that we hide, that we hush the whispers within that call us to create.

We, in our fallen state, are broken; we believe the worst about ourselves.

That is what darkness does when it goes without being pushed back. It lies. It hides all that is good and true. All that is light and life.

Giving in to the lies, we fear the perpetuation of what happened in the garden. We fear we might hear and heed the wrong whisper again. We fear we might listen to a lie and cause a downfall, a destruction to last beyond the length of our lives.

And yet, the one thing we need is the one thing we avoid.

Art.

Art, not as a way of claiming that we are right about anything, but *art* as a way of climbing back toward the light. Yes, *art* as a way of pushing back the darkness within ourselves, within our world.

This art can be *anything* good that comes from our hands. Madeleine L'Engle writes that there really is no such thing as good or bad art. There is only good religion or bad religion, both of which influence the nature of the art.⁴

There is only creativity that lends itself to recreating chaos or there is creativity that lends itself to bringing order and redemption in the world.

All art *is* art. A song is a song, a sketch is a sketch, a sidewalk full of chalk drawings is a sidewalk full of chalk drawings. The matter isn't whether these things bear some sort of measurable amount of beauty; rather, it's whether the art helps us name that which is ineffable. It's whether the art tells the truth about the goodness of God—whether it speaks to and awakens you, turns the light on in the dark corners of your heart.

Any and *all* art that helps, heals, names, entertains, or redeems *is* good.

By and through art, we are led out of hiding and into *here-ness*—out of obscurity and into the obvious. Art invites us to stand before God, naked and vulnerable. Broken and bare. Unclothed, unhidden, and uncovered.

Leafless, as we always should have been.



I have a coir, stitched welcome mat by the door that reads:
Bare your soles.

As in, bare your soles but also bare that actual *soul* of yours. Smooth out that wrinkle on your forehead, calm your beating heart, and come to stillness, to presence.

The mat at my front door is like a welcome sign that beckons bystanders to walk and enter through, all barefoot and

barely breathing, all desperate for a couch to catch their tired bodies.

I cannot help but think of how the same is true of a blank page, or a blank canvas, or an empty stage—they are all the invitation that bids:

Come. Bare your soul.

On the blank canvas or page or stage, when it is only your eyes that peer and perceive, you are welcome to create. You are welcome to bare your heart, the very words buried within.

You can create in confidence, all while withholding criticism, as you work through the wandering and the wondering of your soul.

Thinking back to the garden, to our beginning, it's so vital to know that God's call for man to bravely bring his heart was not meant to instill condemnation. Rather, it was to distill confession.

In Genesis 3, God calls to man asking, "Where are you? . . . Who told you that you were naked? . . . What is this you have done?" (vv. 9, 11, 13).

These questions, these invitations to tell truth, are God presenting his presence. It is God establishing himself as an eternal audience of one, ever listening and leaning into the laments of our living, loving, and losing.

God is still that safe place—indeed, he is the safest. And he welcomes our stories, our honest words and artful, paint-filled songs and poems and posts and pieces. For they are the utterances of our traveling souls, utterances that he himself will never undermine or undercut.

We matter.

Our minds, hearts, bodies, and souls matters. Every detail divulged and every inexpressible, wordless groan matters. He is

present *in* and he is pleased *by* the process of our hearts honestly and artfully pouring out before his.

Maybe it's true for all of us.

Maybe we long to create not just for the ridding, but for a filling of some kind. To be told a truth that we can take with us all through life, a sound speaking over the noise of the world.

A hope that, by shining light on our shattered hearts, piece by piece, they might be put back together again.

Could it be that the spinning together of words with black ink on blank pages might help make sense of all that doesn't make sense in the world? Could it be that baking cakes and stretching limbs long toward lofty skies might help release peace into every unseen piece of our lives?

We write that we might experience the exhale of God again, the sigh and sound of his voice that reminds us of his plan to fill our lives with light.

I see you now, taking everything within you to the page, to posts shared with the world. I see you, no longer fumbling behind coverings or hiding in shame. No longer feeling pushed out by darkness but brought into light.

In writing, you can create with and through words. You can build a new and beautiful world in which the wild and the dark will no longer overpower or overshadow you. In the beautiful words of Lore Wilbert Ferguson:

Tell me, I want to say to my fellow writers, tell me of your inner demons, tell me of your flesh. I want to hear the war that waged within you as you navigated complex stories and spaces. I want to know how hard you fought and how much you wept and

how little you prayed. Tell it honest, tell it slant, tell it however you want to, but tell the truth because the truth is ten thousand little protests that got you where you are and every one of them matters to God and to me and even to you because there you are and there you were all along.⁵

It is not only God who beckons bare words from you, it's me. It's the world. It's the ones around you who know you. It's you deeply wanting to brave your soul and bring your beating heart.

Yes, by way of words you can stand bare before a God who does not badger or beat the truth out of you. He is a gentle, whispering God standing with you, not against you, through it all. He moves you to breathe—a slow seeping, a brave release to gradually push back your darkest memories and moments.

God calls *for* you but also comes *to* you. Telling you that it is okay to bare all of who you are. That you can live beyond brokenness, and that you can become new in spite of it.

You need not sustain or suffer any wild or dark force in your life or in this world. You can safely, artfully name what is good.

And you can surely call out and cast away that which is not.
There he is.

There God *always* is, covering you.

Not with some withering leaf, but with his everlasting love.

Prayer

God, let me hear the sound and song of your love over the lies. Help me to step out of hiding and into honest here-ness. Awaken bravery as I bare my brokenness. Shine a light onto my wounds, and release your healing into the world. Let it be so, in and through me. Amen.

Prompts

What makes your heart beat?

What makes your heart break?

Practices

Light a candle, pour yourself a cup of something soothing, and skim through old journals, letters, emails, or text messages. Read the entries. Observe the dates. Notice your handwriting. Admire the honesty. Reminisce about all you've lived through and how far you've come. Reflect on old wounds, worries, and the wars of the world—all those things that made (and still make) life hard. Then, write in a journal, or a note on your phone, or a letter, or a social media post on how baring honest words in particular seasons of your life has brought you to become who you are today.

Buy a new journal if you need a new start. Make a moment, a big deal out of it. It isn't a failure to have unfinished journals. It is noble to begin again. May opening to the blank page of a brand-new journal help you take new steps toward opening your heart to honesty, self-awareness, and truth.

Pieces

I tried to pick myself up off the floor,
but every time I tried,
my broken self would grip a shard
that cut me deep and cried:

*I am broken. I'm not beautiful. Who could ever love
this mess?*

Until, somehow, Love Himself came down
and did what Love does best.

—Katherine Nadene

Doubt pools in the softness
between my folded fingers,
like rain beneath
a broken gutter.
My faith is flooded.
Unfinished prayer dries
on my tongue.

But God whispers:

*Bring Me your doubt.
This too, is part
of worship, to come exactly
as you are. And this, too,
is a way of healing,
to find I love you
just the same.*

—Gina Sares