

PCAD commencement May 2, 2025
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Hello, I'm Amy Sarig King. I'm honored to be talking to you on this important occasion marking both the end of many years of hard work and dedication, and the beginning of many more years of hard work and dedication. I'm going to start with a quote about inspiration from Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

"Where do I get my ideas from? You might as well have asked that of Beethoven. He was goofing around in Germany like everybody else, and all of a sudden this stuff came gushing out of him. It was music. I was goofing around like everybody else in Indiana, and all of a sudden this stuff came gushing out of me. It was disgust with civilization."

This is the quote that keeps me real in my art. Whether I'm painting, writing a novel, shooting pictures, writing a poem, or weaving surrealist tea towels. Being real is important. It's hard sometimes but it's important.

Forty five years ago today I had a fourth grade orchestra concert as the second chair cellist. I had, that afternoon, just gotten my first ever stitches right here in my hand after a run-in with a pair of scissors. It was also the day of my grandmother's funeral, and when this accident occurred, our house was full of family and friends eating cheese on toothpicks and random cold cuts. By the time I got back from the hospital with my dad, it was time to get ready for the concert. My hand was all gauzed up and swollen, but I put on my weird skirt—hard to find skirts that work for cellists—and went to the concert. Then, I faked the entire show. Didn't play one note.

My mom, who'd just buried her mom, was there in the audience. I felt bad for faking it because she'd just had one of the realest days of her life. But my gut said not to play because it hurt and I was going to make too many mistakes.

45 years later, I can't tell you if I was right to fake. I can't tell you if I would have made mistakes because **I didn't play**. I *can* tell you that as someone who has now been through far more painful things than playing a cello with fresh stitches, that making art in difficult times has always paid off. Even if I get a bad review. Even if I don't make much money. Even if I get death threats. Being

authentic as an artist has been the most freeing and rewarding thing I have ever done. Expression is . . . revolutionary.

But, also? Business is business.

When I speak to graduates of writing programs, I share my own mantra for being a working author. We make paper boats; we cannot control the wind.

I want you to take that and apply it to whatever art you make. You make paper boats. You cannot control the wind. You can paint the best paintings, weave the best textiles, animate the best films, and the outside world may never really know what went into making that boat. Its job is to travel from your mind and hands and heart into the outside world where it will meet with other minds, hands, and hearts, and change them in some way.

That's sweet, yeah? But it doesn't buy a can of beans, does it?

Or it does, maybe. It really depends upon that wind and we cannot control the wind. I am still very close to two of my art school friends who are graphic designers. One went from undergrad to an MFA at Moore and then landed a job at an ad firm in NYC—was the brains behind a big corporate campaign and made his money early—now he's a consultant. The other? Did layout for a newspaper for 20 years, got laid off at 45, started taking pictures on her walks in beach towns...then one day got an idea for a logo on a trip to Nantucket. That logo has sold millions of dollars of merch. You just never can control the wind.

I've worked in the arts for 35 years and it's a little like being a pirate back in the golden age—sometimes your ship gets stuck in dead air, unmoving for months—no food and scurvy sets in, and other times the waves are too high and the gusts nearly take your sails off.

I hate to sound twee or precious, but it really is about the journey. So I've come to you today with a travel bag containing ten small pieces of wisdom.

I've been lucky in my career. I mean, some would balk at that—because it took me writing 8 novels over 15 years and collecting 500 rejection letters to get a novel published—but since then, I've been lucky to have been able to write

what I want to write, and I got so good at ***not faking it*** and at writing the truth, that my work has been internationally recognized. On the business side, I am never **not** writing a book or inventing new ways to write a book, and through that practice, I developed a style all my own and award committees noticed. I am very grateful for those awards, but you know—they don't buy a can of beans either. Art asks us to be patient. Which is hard when one needs beans.

Which brings me to my first nugget of advice: Find ways to get beans. I make speeches, do assembly programs all over the world, and I teach grad students. That's how I make the beans. Sometimes that bean-work overtakes the art-work.

So, my second piece of wisdom is: never forget that art matters. It's what got you there in the first place.

During the writer's strike a few years back I was talking to a civilian who was complaining how his favorite shows weren't on and he wished the writers would just start working again. I said, "They can't afford rent or food because they're paid so little." He said, "They should have chosen a different job, then." And right after that, without a shred of irony, he said something about how the episode of Ted Lasso he watched the night before made him cry.

I was walking through an alley in old Luxembourg two summers ago and I came across a sign that someone had taped to a light pole. It validates everything we do. It read: LAST NIGHT AN ART PIECE SAVED MY LIFE. I took a picture and posted it on Facebook and a guy commented "That's stupid."

Bet he cried at that episode of Ted Lasso, too.

Here's the thing about art. Our culture tells its people not to be emotional or sensitive. It tells them to be practical and not weird. It tells them to keep quiet when terrible things happen to them. It tells them, quite frankly, to fake it. So of course they feel both weird and validated when an artist shows them something true.

Last month when I was writing this address, I wrote a short story in my head about that orchestra concert in 1980. It explores what it would have looked

and sounded like if everyone in the orchestra was faking it. Would the audience play along? Would they leave? Would they whisper to each other? Would the critic in the balcony decide that this was a new type of performance art and declare it brilliant? Would they mock and sink it? The story would be called “The Silent Orchestra.”

The message would be about how every artist has stitches in their hand and is trying to play the cello.

Look. Art is pain made beautiful. Pain is paint. It's ink. It's clay. It's a pair of tap shoes. It's piano keys. I have never reached a reader by lying to them. And I've never affected a human being by writing a cute story that has nothing to do with me. I am the common denominator in my work, and so are you, if you are reading it. Art is connection.

You can't fake it.

If you reach the crossroads where fake is all you got, pivot.

Pivot: that's wisdom nugget #3. You can change mediums, travel, get a job that shocks everyone who knows you. Volunteer—trust me on that one. You will change. You will grow. The realness will rise to the surface again. Never forget what makes you angry. Those seeds thrive in the worst of conditions and the vine leads back to what you care most about.

Wisdom nugget #4 is: stay close to your friends. You need them on this journey because they will remind you that art is important when the world forgets what art even is, and why it's vital to make and maintain human connections, nature connections, astral connections. Connections that haven't even been invented yet.

When we can't control the wind, when our paper boats have been lost to the Bermuda tringle—friends help. In my first 15 years of writing novels, I didn't sell any. That was humbling, but it was right. The art wasn't good enough. I was alone in the art world, 3,000 miles from home, and teaching myself how to write novels on a Swedish typewriter and on eight different types of donated paper because I was so broke.

Now, I have worked 30 years and have gained a reputation. A good one. But the most important thing I have gained in my years of art are the friendships. Be the kind of friend that cheers your friends on, no matter if they end up working for Verizon or working at the newspaper, or if they win the Pulitzer or get a show at the AVAM. Cheer it all on.

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When I was on the faculty of the VCFA, I wrote a lecture entitled “What is Art? And How Do We Make It? (And once we make it what do we do with it? And once we do something with it, where do we put it? And once we put it somewhere, will we be happy?)” In the lecture, I recounted this story.

A few years ago, I was asked to guest lecture at Fordham University for a week. At the time, there was a Max Ernst exhibit at the Modern Museum of Art and Fordham put me up just a few blocks away. So one afternoon, I went. I’m a surrealist, Max is a surrealist—this was going to be great. The exhibit was vast and when I was done there, I wandered upstairs to say hi to some of my favorite paintings. There was a crowd in this one gallery. I didn’t realize that Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” was visiting. I’ve seen the painting before—so I wasn’t all that interested in fighting my way through the throngs of fans. But I watched them take their selfies with it and watched as two guards standing on either side kept people from getting too close.

The painting was centered on a false wall about six feet wide and eight feet high.

I went to look at the other paintings in that gallery and was shocked to find, on the other side of the false wall, centered, back-to back to Starry Night, a Cezanne. And not just ANY Cezanne. It was “Boy in the Red Vest” If you know Cezanne, you know he rarely asked anyone to sit for him. And in this series, he painted four oils of a young man named Michelangelo Di Rosa. Monet declared this painting to be Cezanne’s best. I stood back and watched the frenzy for “The Starry Night” and how people walked around the back of the false wall to get to it. None of them stopping to view the Cezanne. Over ten minutes, I took picture after picture of blurred people rushing past, but never stopping to see this beautiful boy.

Friends, I felt such disgust with civilization. I sat down on the bench outside the gallery and wrote a poem about how Michelangelo Di Rosa deserved better. I was so upset at those people who dared ignore that boy. That was me! That was me on the back of that wall. It was the reality of my career in real time. People so busy looking for something they recognized, they had no time to stop and try something new.

To add insult to injury, while walking back to my hotel I saw a bus stop advertisement for one of the Girl with the Dragon Tattoo books—very popular at the time. I laughed so hard I cried, then took a picture of it. As I walked, I made peace with myself, made peace with who I am and the art I make. And I decided my life's focus would be on enjoying the ride. I cannot control the wind, so now I look up and write about the sky.

I'm not gonna tell you not to compare yourselves to others. You will. Sometimes you'll feel bigger and sometimes you'll feel smaller. Some people are going to hate your work. Some will adore it. Critics are not your business. The only review that matters is yours.

My mentor was a well-known Irish painter named Tony O'Malley—he was close friend, a neighbor, and an incredible human being. On his gravestone is etched in his own handwriting my favorite quote when it comes to being an artist. "Never be swayed by anything but by your work and vision."

That's wisdom nugget #5. *Never be swayed by anything but by your own work and vision.*

If you get frustrated and want to quit art, wisdom #6 is: quit art. Seriously. Make yourself not paint, make yourself not work. Make yourself not write. Make yourself stay away from the loom, the computer, the darkroom. The longer you stay away the more you will understand that expression is an addiction. A healthy addiction. It's healing from stitches you may not even know about yet. Trust me on that. If you don't make the art, you won't get the answer.

As artists, we are both the puzzle makers and the puzzle solvers.

Every new museum I walk into, I seem to find one painting that makes me cry. I am betting the artist who made the painting that made me cry doubted that painting at least once while they were making it. The receiver of art is also the puzzle maker and the puzzle solver. Once it's on the wall, it's out of your hands.

What a relief.

The next project awaits.

Always move forward. That's #7, Always be making the next art.

#8 is Get used to hearing the word no. Relish it somehow. See each no as an invitation to make more art. Get rejected on purpose.

#9 is destroy things.

When you walk out of this place, your job is to evolve. Your job is to make mistakes. Your job is to destroy every idea and rule you learned here. You are artists, after all. You have the power now. Only no one told you that artists are the ones with the power.

They told you that artists were idealists.

Wild.

The opposite of level-headed.

Kooky. Dreamers.

It was a trick to keep you away from the power.

I'm glad you made it this far.

We need you now more than ever.

What else is there to do with power but destroy things? Start with ideas like: I can't write poems, I can't draw hands. I'm not good at painting etc. Destroy your doubt. Destroy your own traps. Take note that not everything has been done yet. And what you will do will be entirely original to you. Yours. Be defiantly creative. Make people double take. We are the voices of our generations. Art lives longer than we do. Talk about power.

Finally, #10 is: never leave any of you behind. Not your child self, your teenage self, your college self. It is their stories you will be telling as you grow old. They are what formed you.

Art is a medium to dissect and explore life. So one day when you're 55, you'll be writing a speech that you know you're going to give on May 2nd, and you will

remember the cheese on toothpicks, the blood dripping off your elbow, the cello bow hovering right above each string—playacting.

I still can't tell you if faking it 45 years ago today was wise. I can only tell you that we make paper boats, and our main medium is us. Forget your genius, trust your gut and do what feels right.

Never lose your anger, your joy, your disgust with civilization. Do not give up. The beans will come. You have the power. Trust me.

For today though, congratulate yourself for all it took for you to reach this achievement, celebrate with friends and family, relax a little, and remember that no matter what you do, as long as you're not faking it, you're probably doing the right thing.

Congratulations on this outstanding success.

Thank you very much.

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