

# Mixing Mediums

Christine Brooks Cote

Most of my career was spent working in higher education, and you can be sure it was engrossing at times to sit back and observe what went on: the interactions, the favors, who spoke at meetings and who did not, who made decisions, the bombshells, the politics. It was the stuff of novels and short stories. How often did some of us say, “I could write a book.” It’s the same everywhere. That’s what happens in organizations, and that’s why there’s a branch of social science that studies them.

The psychologists and sociologists who study organizations research people’s behaviors and interactions; examine the patterns and structures used to solve problems, maximize efficiency and productivity; and they study organizational culture, how it gets created, instilled, and changed. Many of us find this kind of information fascinating because it’s a big part of how our lives are lived. No matter if you’ve worked in health care, non-profits, restaurants and hotels, finance, industry, education, or technology, you have probably been an amateur scientist, observing the culture of the place and trying to make sense of the behaviors going on around you.

Once you’ve been with an organization for a while, you learn how the place works and how things get done, and you learn how to get done what you want to do with a minimum of difficulty. There was one principle of engagement that I learned was critical to waging any successful campaign, be it changing policy or even just changing the furniture. It was

*acknowledge the importance of process.* Many great ideas never had a chance because the process of going from point A to point B was either not well planned or not well executed, or both. As we would say, *it’s all about the process.* You can try to implement a new policy (or bring in new furniture) that you believe makes perfect sense and is obviously a great idea, but if the process of preparation, communication, and implementation comes up short, you’re left with nothing—zilch, zero, nada. Process is all-important. How you frame the discussion, who you involve, how you handle communication, even where meetings are held and what you bring in for lunch—these require careful planning and the skill to prepare for and manage both expectations and disagreements.

*It’s all about the process.* An important axiom in the workplace, yes, but it’s important in other aspects of life as well: remodeling the kitchen, planning family reunions, putting in a new stoplight. Sometimes process is more important than what you may have thought was the intended outcome or final product. Sometimes the process reveals that what you thought you wanted is really the very thing you don’t want or need. Sometimes the process makes the entire effort such a success that people talk about it forever, perhaps as an important turning point in a relationship or as a model for how for how to plan future reunions or meetings. Sometimes, years later, you remember the process but can’t recall what came out of it. *It’s all about the process.* Or as Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “It’s not the destination, it’s the journey.”

So let’s get to what I really want to talk about: art. Artists often say, though they’ll say it in different ways, that the process of making art is what it’s all about for them. The experience of inspiration, arriving at how to make one’s idea a reality, mixing the paints, moving the brush along the canvas, holding the camera, feeling the texture of the stone, editing the photograph, collecting the objects—that’s the fun part. That’s when the hands are busy and the mind is solely focused on discovery and creation. That’s when the artist most feels like an artist. ***That’s when flow takes over.*** (If you’ve never read *Flow* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, you must!)

So here’s the crux of the matter, the point of all this build-up: ***Living is an art form, and the process of living is what it’s all about.*** The very act of waking up each morning, doing the zillions of things we do during the day, and finally going to bed at night—that’s art. What is life about if not to figure out how to craft or create a life worthy of the effort? Living requires imagination, creativity, inspiration, practice, a bit of learning from the masters, and time to stand back and recognize what’s been accomplished. How does one go about living? By mixing mediums, of course.

Sometimes in life we just need to pick up a pencil and do a quick sketch—maybe as an observation, a communication, a to-do list, a note to remind ourselves to pay the electric bill. Sometimes we load our brush with paint and with a skilled hand apply ourselves to our task, gliding along, different colors, different textures, until the canvas is complete. Or we might pour hot wax on a surface and watch as it finds the path of least resistance, filling the crevices and holes, rapidly at first, then slowly as the wax cools and nears its finality, its destination. Sound familiar? Life works that way too.

Sometimes we find ourselves having to use a hammer and chisel to attack the problem at hand, chipping away at the stone, casting the excess to the side as we gradually reveal the gem we knew was hidden deep inside, our vision pushing us on while others doubt there’s anything there worth the effort. Sometimes we go too far and realize we have to give up on what we’ve done and start over.

Sometimes in life we see something in a different way than others. Everyone might see a flower but only we see innocence and grace. Everyone drives by a house in ruins but only we see the family that once called that house a home, the children who once played on the swingset. We take a photograph to capture what we saw and what others perhaps didn’t see. It’s a reminder of the things that can be missed—the important things.

Sometimes in life we construct a story, complete with characters and plot and scenery. It’s the story of our future, where we want to be in five, ten, or twenty years, what we want to accomplish, how we want life to turn out.

And sometimes we take time to gather the stuff of life—autumn leaves, seashells, driftwood, stones, feathers—and arrange them in a particular way that gives meaning to our lives, that points to the beauty and contentment that we repeatedly find along the way.

There are many different ways to be an artist. There are many different ways to be a person, to live a life. We each figure out what works, what allows us to flow, what feels good.

But there is a commonality, one thing that all these ways of being an artist, all these ways of living are for. That one thing is joy. ❖