

The Visual Journal as a Life's Work

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For over twenty years I have been teaching at Capilano University. Some of my colleagues might be surprised to learn that I keep a visual journal and have done so for the past thirty-eight years. I have bins full of notebooks. It is crucial that I'm creative, every single day (a visceral learning by doing). A visual journal – a combination of writing and artwork – is my way of accomplishing this.



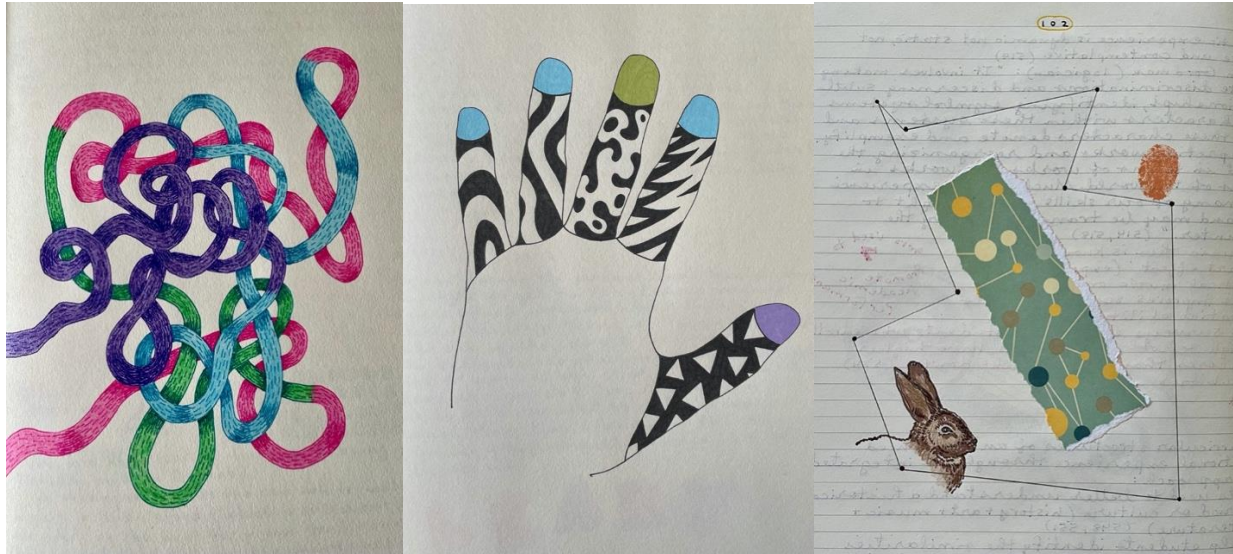
Within their pages I track the accomplishments and embarrassments of my life. These books are far more telling than anything else I might create, more personal and sustainable than my other interests. It is a daily practice through which I struggle to know myself better, to uncover and understand the slow transformations I make en route to becoming more familiar to myself. Academics teach critical thinking, but how many of us take the time, outside of our disciplines, to reflect, to ponder, to question, to probe – not our subject matter, but *ourselves*?



Don't misunderstand me; my visual journals are neither literary nor accomplished. They are not even artistic by most standards; I'm no Anaïs Nin or Frida Kahlo. It isn't the product - all these books I've filled - but rather *the process* that has been enjoyable, even *necessary*. I am compelled to do this. It is part of me; it anchors me to meaning in times of turbulence, but also in times of abundant joy. My visual journals serve as archives, workbooks, sketchbooks, and my ancillary memory. They are places I can rant and be insipid, challenge myself, shock myself, amuse myself, dwell on politics and the news, and occasionally, probably accidentally, discover something profound. I keep track of my concerns, my observations, my hobbies, my travels, my pet peeves. I doodle, write poetry, collage, paint, capture quotes from what I'm reading, and mind-map for projects. Sometimes I just write down where I went and what I did in banal, uninspiring words, because life's minutiae are part of who I am too.

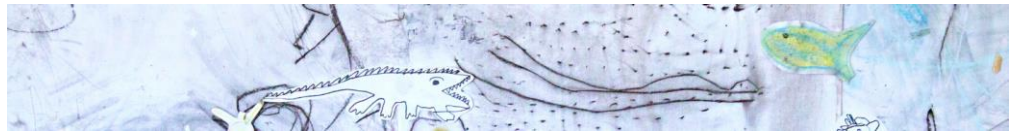


I have started and rejected many pursuits in my life, but visual journaling has been a steadfast constant. It took a long time before I understood this activity as having intrinsic value. Often, I've felt selfish for spending so much time pouring out thoughts and images on pages that nobody will look at or read. It seems self-indulgent. Shouldn't I spend more time with actual people? Yet, what I do in my journals shapes who I am, and that is the self I then take out into the workplace, the community, the world – that is my obligation – to come into spaces as my reflective, critical thinking, expanded self: a perpetual learner, who never wants to lose my sense of curiosity and wonder. I don't think there is anything more profound than coming to know who one might be and offering that as genuinely as possible to others in daily interactions, hoping they do the same.



Reflection can start early. Children can benefit from writing down or creatively processing their thoughts and feelings. Journaling is a calm, quiet and grounding activity. It takes time, focus and energy (things often in short supply), but the payoff is immeasurable. Answers to questions might come haphazardly, cryptically, jarringly. The questions (and answers) evolve through time. What kind of life have we lived? Where do we find meaning? Have we connected with other people in fulfilling ways? Have we helped? What memories are holding us back? What obstacles do we have to face? In what other safe haven could we roll these questions around and articulate our tentative answers to them, other than a private journal? Maybe a therapist’s office, but the fees are certainly a barrier.





There are others out there telling their stories to themselves, raw and unedited. Stories do not have to be told using words; images can serve that purpose too, whether abstract or naturalistic. Grandiose or utterly ordinary, it does not matter. There is no escaping the fact that human beings are by turns heartbreakingly flawed, incredibly naïve, and magnificently brilliant. Every life has its landscape, its soundtrack, its energy reverberating in ways difficult to trace. *We all have a story*. The tragedy is that so few people think they do. Or, equally tragically, they let their story be told by others who have no real *stake* in it.

My journal is a witness to one of my most important relationships, the relationship I have with myself. It is a pushing back against eventual, inevitable obliteration. It is a testament to mortality's simple yet wondrous fact: "I existed."

Artist Bio

Sandra is a faculty member at Capilano University, where she has been teaching Art History and Women's and Gender Studies since 2001. She loves drawing and keeping a visual journal, and she has been working on an illustrated book about the benefits of mark-making for everyone. She likes to spend time outdoors in the woods or by the Fraser River walking her adopted greyhounds, and she always tries to engage with the world around her, cultivating her sense of curiosity and her observational skills. Sandra believes it is our right as humans to be unapologetically creative, no matter what our skill level or ability.