

On knowing a creative life is the path you want to take



Writer Christene Barberich discusses the fear of not getting everything you want, the financial difficulties of a creative career, and how your space is a reflection of your mindset.

October 1, 2024 -

As told to Jess Focht, 2789 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Adversity](#), [Identity](#), [Money](#), [Inspiration](#), [Beginnings](#), [Process](#).

I'm a fan of your newsletter, [A Tiny Apt](#), and how you write about lessons you've learned over the years. It seems like you've always been a visionary but had to carve out spaces for yourself in certain areas. Earlier on, you struggled to establish and bring your creative visions to life, so I'm sure you're aware that success doesn't happen overnight.

I have bookmarked one of your essays titled "[The Letter to my 34-year-old Child-Free Self](#)" where you write, "The life we dream about that we're not sure is real is actually existing somewhere and we just have to go and find her."

So thinking of all the young creative people and visionaries who are just getting started, what is something you wish you could go back and tell your younger self?

The hardest thing about that time, specifically for women, is that if you're ambitious and you have big professional goals and dreams that require a lot of time and personal investment—and a lot of times isolation—it can feel like a tremendous conflict in our lives to know that we should be opening ourselves up to partnership or paving the way for having a family someday.

I wanted to make a living as a person doing creative work, and that was not the most profitable way to subsidize my life. I was really scared that I would never have the resources to be able to own an apartment, even rent a nice apartment, or have a child.

When you're pursuing a creative existence, everything's expensive. Going out for dinner is expensive. I questioned if I should take an Uber this morning because I was running late to a meeting and I was like, "Oh, it's \$35." You know what I mean?

We value how much we earn and how much things cost and how long things take. I felt so consumed at such a rich and vibrant point in my life. I wish someone had told me I'll have everything I want. It may not come in the order that I necessarily expect or desire, but our only job at that point is to be honest with ourselves about what we want and what we're dreaming about.

There's a lot of fear of criticism, of competition, of people that we need in our lives who may not love us anymore because we're not fulfilling some other kind of destiny. And there's just so much in the way of living that life. You know?

I'm personally speaking from someone who didn't have any generational wealth. I was literally living paycheck to paycheck. And I remember that I tried hard not to borrow money from my parents because they couldn't afford it either, but they were the kind of parents who would give me \$40 to cover the train fare when I would take the Long Island Railroad train home to see them for the weekend. And it was so appreciated. When you're broke, and somebody gives you \$40, that's a lot of money.

Sometimes you just need a little bit of hope, a little bit of support. You don't need a lot. And that's honestly this investment in yourself that prepares you for building something that's so unknowable like we did later with our company [Refinery29] because that was a very risky thing to do.

You mentioned money, and that leads to the next question. I read your Debt Story and you touched on this, but I think it's really important to have conversations about money, even though it can be a taboo in the creative field. What lessons about creativity and resilience did you learn from this period? What advice would you give to creatives who are struggling with financial difficulties while trying to maintain their creative pursuits?

Well, there's two things. There's reality and then your perceptions of reality because of what you were born with. I grew up in a world where there was a lot of anxiety about money and about how we were going to pay our bills. My mother was an unbelievable role model for me and would work all the time just so I could have braces. She didn't believe in credit card debt and that kind of stuff, but she was so determined to give us everything that we needed, not necessarily everything that we wanted. And she instilled a work ethic in me and my sister that is unbreakable.

But when you work for yourself, you need resources around you and support systems— and that can be very intimidating. One of the most important things is to feel that you have a team in place.

Knowing that you can call those people and ask for advice so you're not completely alone is one thing. And then try to remember that life is expansive. Anything can happen, anything can change at a moment's notice. It requires so much faith and belief in ourselves, and that can be very, very hard, especially when we are self-critical. It's hard not to do that when we need social media as a marketing sort of outlet for our work, and you're seeing other people that are doing things similar to you but are doing it better. It can be very easy to spiral.

So I think it's important to root down in who you are and what your gifts are, and try not to get distracted by everything that's happening around you, including your own historical baggage. To try not to catastrophize about every single thing because our lives and our careers are like a tapestry. You need those moments of working hard and feeling hungry that make other points in the tapestry where you're hitting a groove, or feeling a lot of momentum and support. You need to understand and live through both so you can know how to use them.

If we only know success, then we don't appreciate it. And I don't want anyone to feel as though struggle is necessary. It's not. But from my own experience, having gone through those tough periods where I wasn't sure if I could make it is hard.

When your work matters that much to you and you feel like you don't want to do anything else. It's a really honest and important conversation to have with yourself. It's like, okay, I'm not going to do anything else. How am I going to make this work?

It's like, this is just my life. This is what I'm going to be doing, and I am going to ride this thing until the wheels fall off.

Your design and use of color are inspiring—especially how you use them together so unexpectedly and joyfully. So I was curious, how have you worked to cultivate your unique artistic expression?

I've had a vision since I was little in tricking out a broom closet and turning it into a reading nook. I remember moving the vacuum cleaners out. We only had two hallway closets in the whole house, and I moved the vacuum

cleaners out and just brought a little lamp in with a cord. I have always had a way of seeing spaces that have been therapeutic for me.

I lived in a small apartment on the Upper East Side that was around 200 square feet and was one room with a tiny little hallway kitchen and a beautiful Pepto Bismol pink tiled bathroom from the fifties. But it was what I could afford.

And that apartment saved my life. I treated it like a palace. I took such good care of it. I cleaned it lovingly. I would buy myself fresh flowers whenever I could afford it. I entertained if I could. And it nourished me, and it took care of me during the most frightening lonely years of my life: before I was in a relationship, before I could even consider thinking about whether or not I would have a family someday, when I was getting published for the first time, stepping away from Conde Nast to finally just live a more independent life and start a magazine and then start a website.

And that's why I had to name the newsletter "A Tiny Apartment," because it wasn't just about a place, it was about the symbolic way of seeing how a space can be a launchpad for us, and that it can provide all the conditions that we need to make something—whether that's a family, whether that's a career pivot, whether that's grieving, whether that's starting a newsletter.

You don't need a lot of space. What you need is yourself reflected in it and being honest about what those things are.

There are a couple of things that I've picked up from this conversation so far and just want to point out. We were talking about being a self-made artist. I'm realizing another reason why I relate to your writing and story so much is you don't come from this place of privilege. A lot of *The Creative Independent's* audience is made up of people who are trying to live and survive as artists in the world, in a world that's telling them they can't be as creative as they'd like, or they need to just focus on money.

Seeing how you balance everything is motivational. It's another reason why I love your newsletter—because New Yorkers live in tiny apartments for the most part, unless you're very wealthy or are lucky in some way. Working with a small space and being able to carve out a creative life for yourself is inspiring.

I think that's also important in a society that always teaches us to want more and more. I love the thematic elements of your newsletter like thrifting because you're reusing and giving these things new life. But also tiny apartments. Looking at your space and knowing you live here and thinking about how at home and happy you feel here is inspiring because you've created it for yourself, and it doesn't have to be this gigantic mansion, and not saying that that's my idea of success, but I do feel like that that is—

For some people, it is.

Exactly. And I think in the capitalistic society we live in that's focused on consumerism and the bigger and more the better, it's refreshing to see.

Something I wanted to go back to when you were talking about your studio apartment and living by yourself is this concept of solitude and how it relates to your creativity. I loved reading your newsletter about your morning routine. How do moments of solitude and preparation for the day nourish your creativity?

I mean, in so many innumerable ways. It's the only way that you hear that little voice. Sometimes we are too busy and not interested in being inconvenienced to listen to it because sometimes it is inconvenient. Sometimes it's disruptive, sometimes it's going to disappoint people. But I think that what I do in the morning during that time, it's like I am in that contract with myself where I'm like, okay, I know I have to do that thing I don't want to do or say or finish, but I'm going to do these things during this time in the morning.

And then I'm kind of free. You know what I mean? And we need to be our own best friends in that way. And it's

taken me a lifetime to love myself the way that I love my closest friends and my husband and my cat.

We're currently sitting in your cute and curated design-forward apartment, and I'm curious, how does space in itself affect your mindset and creativity day-to-day?

It doesn't even affect my mindset. It *is* my mindset. I mean, this apartment is an extension of my existence, of my whole soul.

It goes back to that Beatles lyric. "The love you take is equal to the love you make." And I believe that. When I'm feeling depressed or I'm feeling scarcity, I always have to automatically think, "Okay, what do I need to be giving? What do I need to be putting out there? What do I need to be? How do I need to be more generous and more expansive and more open?" Because our lives are a reflection of what and who we are. And this apartment is an important, visual reminder of just who I am and who I have been. And that's invigorating on a lot of levels.

Lastly, what emerging trends in storytelling and content creation excite you the most? And what advice would you give to young people trying to carve out a space for themselves—specifically young writers and content creators?

The pendulum has swung back. There's a sort of resistance to scale and SEO and keyword saturation and ranking on Google, so everyone's stories are the same.

And what happens is you sort of abandon your instincts as a storyteller. It's like you're constantly trying to game the system and figure out what's going to be the next big viral win. And I think what I've brought with me are some of those tools, like remembering how to be smart and strategic with packaging the content that I have. But it's been so reassuring to know that my instincts still work because a lot of my best-performing stories have been things that are completely unrelated to anything in the zeitgeist or even in conversations that I've been seeing online.

I think the dawn of Substack has been this reawakening of voices and of niche topics and people being able to go deep again and learn about obscure things. There's a sense of ownership and agency in these newsletters where people are taking good care of them, with the hope of actually being able to earn a living from it. Substack is only going to get more dynamic and strategic in making it possible for writers to do this as the core, as the main thing that they do—so they can develop these platforms in a way that speaks to a community that needs it, and that gets something important out of it.

There's a freshness there that I think an audience loves.

Right. And people are craving that in the world of algorithms.

Yeah. It feels like a relief.

Christene Barberich recommends:

Documentary, [Squaring the Circle, The Story of Hipgnosis](#). This came out in 2022, and it blew my mind for so many reasons, but mostly because it tells the story of two creative partners who had the courage to do something so radically different in the music business by helping bands like Pink Floyd and Wings to create these arresting/iconic culture-defining artistic moments in time...images that transformed how we connected to an album/body of work. I loved the relationship between the two founders, too...it's a creative's journey but it's actually more of a love story. Which is, I guess, how all the best businesses are sparked.

[Holy Art](#): My friend collects vintage [ex-voto symbols/metal plaques](#) when she travels (she has a whole incredible wall of them), and when she sent me this site, we both went down a rabbit hole of exploring all this bygone era spiritual iconography. The crowns are kind of spectacular...

[Ilaria Icardi Jewelry](#). I'm not a huge jewelry person, but her designs literally take my breath away. Specifically [this red tuxedo ring](#) she did in partnership with Airmail...I can't wait to buy it for myself.

Sangre de Fruta Botanical Tonic Mist. I'm officially addicted. I have a bottle in every room. I love all the formulas, including the Jasmin de Nuit, and I spray it on my pillows and face constantly.

A Dictionary of Color Combinations. Looking at color through different contrasting examples is simultaneously soothing and stimulating for me. We are building a 650 square-foot modern cabin upstate made of straw panels, and although we won't have a ton of painted surfaces, I'm using this book to figure out where color will go and why. It's fun.

Isaac Mizrahi. I've been meaning to re-watch Unzipped, which I think turns 30 next year. I can't get enough of him on Instagram...he is never not spontaneously delighting about something, which really lifts my spirits. I don't know him, but I love him.

Starting the day with gratitude. Trying to switch off the catastrophizing part of my brain, and finding things to be grateful for first thing in the morning helps. A lot.

Name

Christene Barberich

Vocation

writer

□