Culture

Book Reviews



(Unsplash/Aaron Burden)



by Jean P. Kelly

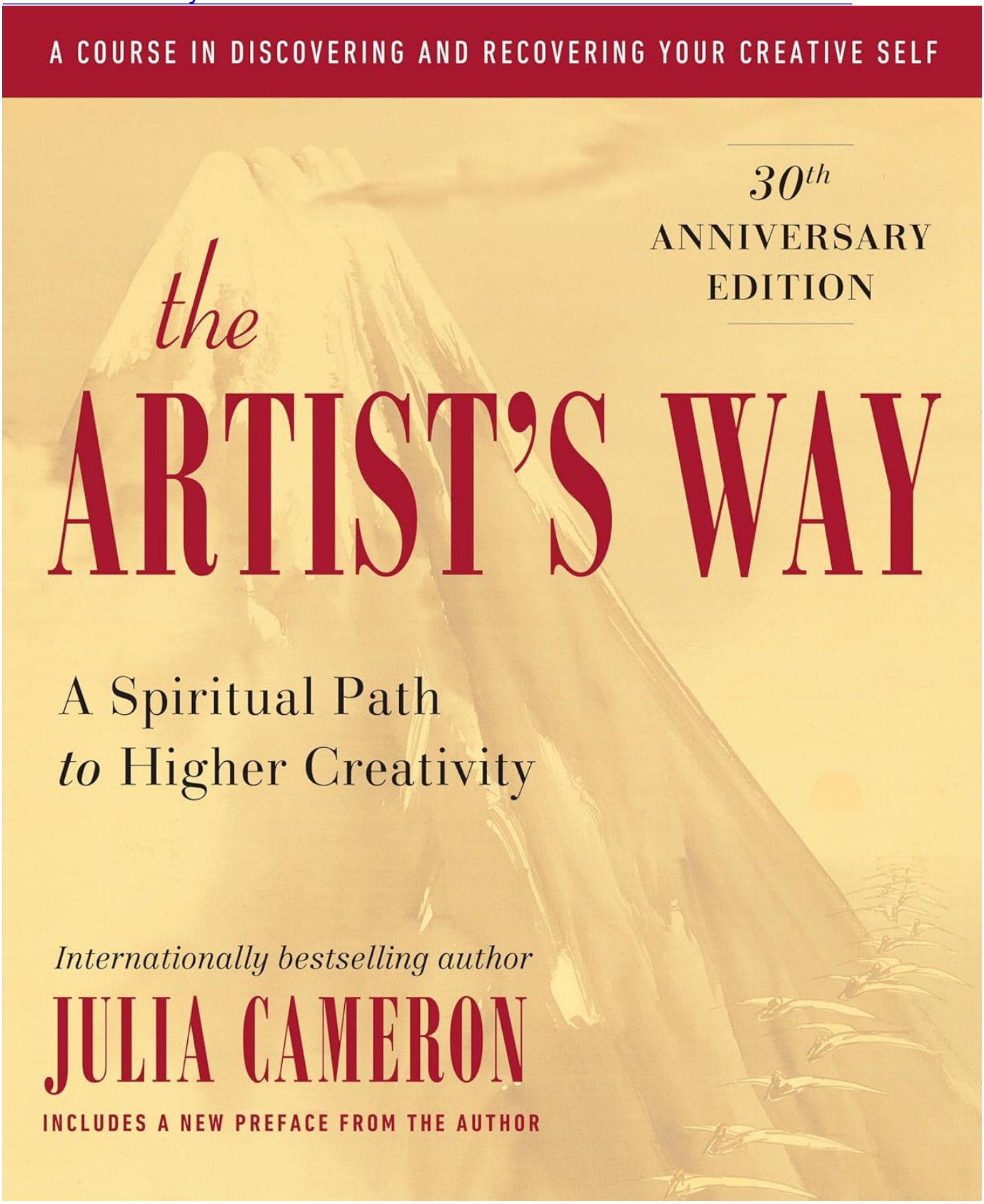
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The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity
Julia Cameron
272 pages; Penguin Random House

$24.00

Alicia Keys. Doechii. Bella Hadid. Reese Witherspoon. Anna Burns. Even Martin Scorsese. (Scorsese and the author were married and divorced.) Celebrities, influencers and everyday creators can't seem to get enough of a 30-year-old book that blends creativity with faith. The title and its 12-week self-help program insist we're all artists.

Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, first published in 1992, has sold over 5 million copies and has experienced a surge of new interest in the past few years. On TikTok, hashtags like #MorningPages and #ArtistsDates, referencing two of the program's required practices, appear in over 8 million posts.

The roots of Cameron's "creativity recovery" phenomenon are surprisingly theistic. As a Catholic school alumna with 16 years of religious education, the author understands creativity as a divine gift. Many Catholic parishes and retreat centers now offer *The Artist's Way* workshops alongside Scripture and rosary recitation. Practicing Catholics say the book and its 12-step spirituality not only deepened their faith, but also permanently transformed their lives.

"Facilitating the program in a Catholic setting has been life-altering," says Kathy Parulski, co-curator of the Holy Family Passionist Retreat Center's art gallery in West Hartford, Connecticut. Natasha Lovely, a cradle Catholic, corporate marketing director, and clinical therapist, credits *The Artist's Way* with bringing God into her work life. Singer-songwriter and Catholic high school theology teacher Jessica Gerhardt says the book's faith-filled framework helped her "reparent my inner child."



Author Julia Cameron (Courtesy photo)

Cameron, now 77, documented in a 2006 memoir her journey from origins in a large Catholic family near Chicago to success as "The Queen of Change," head of a self-help dynasty anchored by more than 40 books, not to mention several play and film scripts, children's titles and even a musical album. Along the way she credits religious sisters and Jesuit professors with early nurturing of her talents and supporting her dream to be a writer. Though she says she rejected Catholicism in college and embraced the myth of the tortured, hard-drinking artist, addiction eventually led her to sobriety, Alcoholics Anonymous and — reluctantly — back to prayer.

"I prayed, 'Thy will be done,' coming to trust that God's will was gentle," Cameron writes. "The more I prayed, the stronger the presence felt."

Her recovery first inspired workshops for blocked creatives, modeled on AA's steps. That approach became *The Artist's Way* book and, most recently, a book of meditations for artists scheduled to be published in November 2025.

All of Cameron's titles share the same premise: because we are creations of God, every person is called to create. "Creativity is God's gift to us," Cameron writes. "Using our creativity is our gift back to God."

Just who "God" is — Higher Power, Great Creator, etc. — the author leaves to individual discretion, as does AA. But she makes no apologies for her own theism. "When we open ourselves to exploring our creativity," she writes, "we open ourselves to God."



(Unsplash/Caspar Rae)

This "opening" happens via the program's four non-negotiable disciplines, completed solo or with support from small groups Cameron calls "creative clusters." Morning Pages are mandatory three pages of daily freewriting. Weekly two-hour excursions meant to restore playfulness and childlike enjoyment are Artist's Dates. Meditative Walks cultivate presence and attention. And Writing for Guidance encourages two-way discourse with God through journaling direct questions in prayer.

Gerhardt, who has co-facilitated creative clusters more than once, said she now considers creative practice as worship. "If you see your inner artist as God in you, then you're honoring God," she said. "The disciplines are in service of God."

Each chapter of the book *The Artist's Way* — beginning with "Recovering a Sense of Safety" and ending with "Recovering a Sense of Faith" — supports the disciplines with quizzes, affirmations, visualizations and exercises such as rewriting negative beliefs about artists, collecting joy-inducing objects and composing a personal artist's prayer. Inspiring quotes by successful artists and philosophers, including Catholic theologian Meister Eckhart, embellish every page. Cameron's book *Seeking Wisdom: A Spiritual Path to Creative Connection* liberally quotes Catholic experts on prayer, including doctor of the church St. Teresa of Avila and Mother Teresa.

> " 'Creativity is God's gift to us,' Cameron writes. 'Using our creativity is our gift back to God.' "
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The demands are rigorous, devotees say, but the foundations of obedience, sacrifice and spiritual joy are comfortably familiar to Catholics. Gerhardt recognizes in Cameron's admonition to combat "the censor" an echo of Ignatian spirituality's battle against the false spirit. Likewise, Lovely turned to *The Artist's Way* as a means for integrating Ignatian spiritual practices into her busy life. "[The book] helped me extract the beauty, the fun — with God in the experience," she says.

Catholic creatives express feeling drawn to the program's welcoming spirituality precisely because the openness allows blending with traditional devotions. Lovely, for example, writes her Morning Pages during daily morning prayer, a habit she finds confessional and healing. Long after completing the program the first time, she continues Artist's Dates, seeing them as mini-pilgrimages to find beauty in the

world. "Leisure is not necessarily meant to be idleness," Lovely explained. "It also can be worship. I actually do my Artist Dates on Sundays, as part of my practice of the Sabbath."

The book, not to mention social media posts, documents plentiful examples of success attributed to the program, but the most compelling among them recognize a mysterious divine hand in both the end product and a supreme spiritual happiness that comes along for the ride.

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"The disciplines have brought so much joy to my everyday," Lovely said. "I now notice the smallest things, which adds so much color to my life."

Anna Burns, author of the award-winning novel *Milkman*, used *The Artist's Way* while writing her debut, which draws on her Catholic childhood in Northern Ireland. "The writing came out of nowhere," she recalled in a 2020 interview. "It burst upon me … with a sense of pure joy."

Gerhardt shared a similar story. While completing the program, she wrote a new song effortlessly. "The melody and chord progression came into my head, nagging at me to write it. It just kind of came out of me," she said.

Whether we are Catholic or not, *The Artist's Way* encourages us all to honor our Creator by seeking beauty, honoring our true selves and being creative. As Cameron writes in the final chapter: "Creativity requires faith. Faith requires that we relinquish control."

Teresa of Avila couldn't have said it better herself.

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