





# FINDING *Encouragement*

BY ANNE BUTERA

I'm writing this on one of those perfect summer days — clear blue skies, clear air — sitting in my garden beside a purple mound of catmint that is a-hum with pollen-happy bees. Sweet peas scent the breeze. A cardinal trills from his perch on the fence and chickadees chatter as they hop from branch to branch in the birch tree. It's my favorite time of year: the height of summer. In my garden with my steaming mug of coffee and my pen and notebook, I feel completely at peace. The hatred, violence, and ugliness that proliferate on the news seem far away.

For the past six years, I have written my blog, *My Giant Strawberry*. When I first started it, I wasn't a painter or an artist at all. I had no idea where I was heading, but I had a strong desire to create. Over the years, post after post, I've documented my journey into art, chronicling both my failures and my accomplishments. At times when heart-sickening headlines dominate, what I do in my little corner of the world seems so small and insignificant: a painting of flowers, a joy list, an incitement to do something creative and pay attention to the world's glimmers of magic. ➤➤





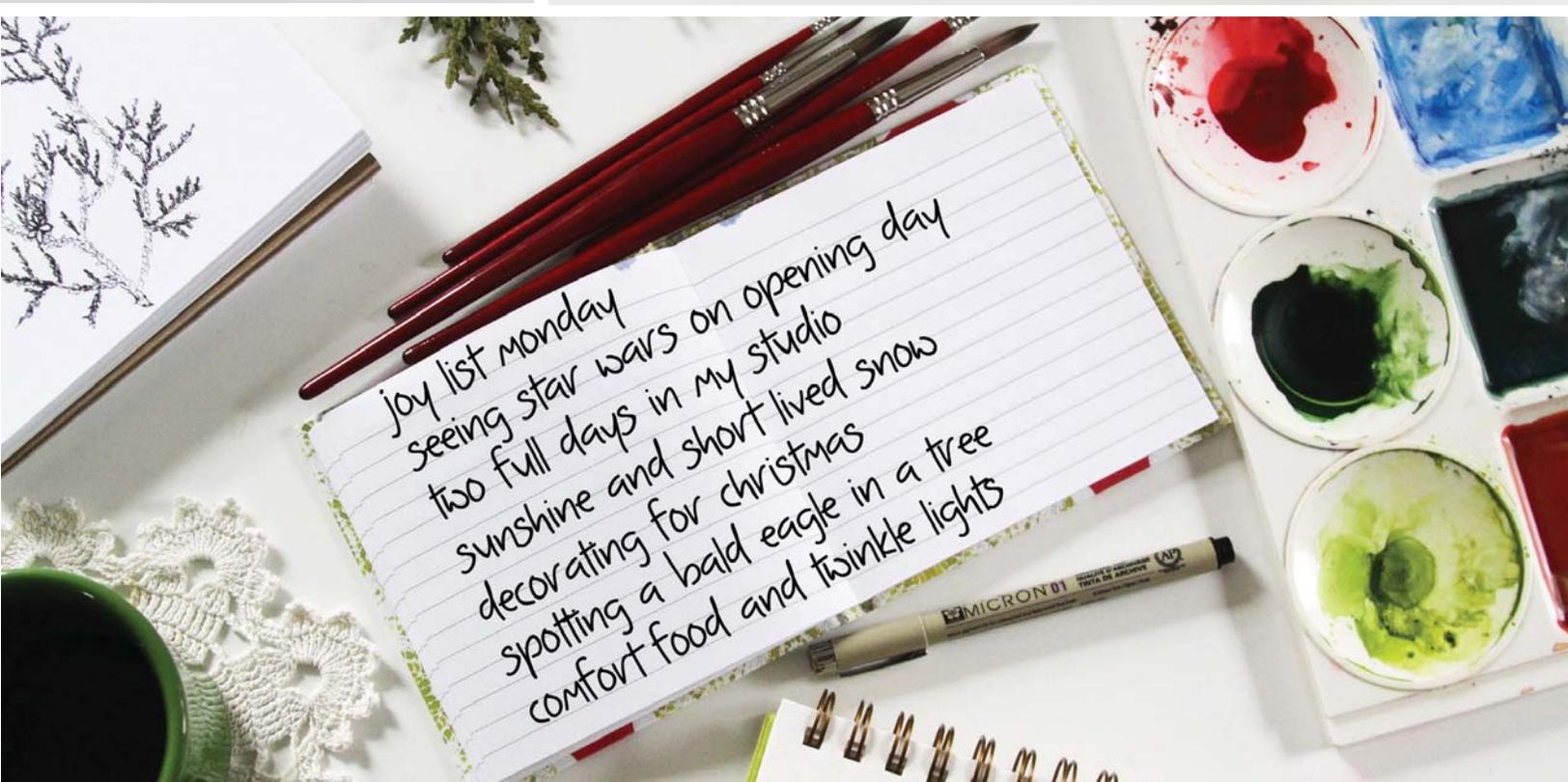
Art is a small thing. Blogging is a small thing. In the face of the world's darkness, what difference does it make? It's easy to doubt the value of what we do when what we do is small or seemingly so. But then I'm reminded of the quote attributed to Mother Teresa: "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love." I certainly don't compare myself to a woman who devoted her life to the service of others, but I find solace and encouragement in her assertion that what we do matters, even when small.

My blog isn't large. I don't have tens of thousands of readers, just an intimate community of kindred spirits. For me, blogging isn't about promoting my art. It's about making connections. It's about community and inspiration. It's about sharing what I've learned with the world and learning from others in return. Having a small following makes it easier to truly connect. One connection brought about a collaborative sketchbook project that not only pushed, challenged, and inspired me, but also brought international recognition when our project was featured in Uppercase Magazine. I strive to create and facilitate connections when I reach out to fellow creatives for my monthly Artist Interviews. ➤



There are quieter connections, too — comments on my blog posts, notes in my email. My personal life isn't the focus of my blog, but bits slip in every once in a while. This past January my husband was diagnosed with cancer. To say that my life was suddenly turned upside down may sound cliché, but I can't think of how else to describe it. My priorities toppled and although my passion for making art didn't wane, it had to take a back seat. Fear and uncertainty overshadowed everything and I couldn't keep those feelings out of my blog posts. When I wrote, without giving any specifics about how my life was taking a detour, many people responded. They wrote comments. They sent me emails. They sent me cards in the mail.

These kindred spirits who read my words were sending me encouragement and light. That, too, might seem like a small thing. What is one card, one comment, one email in the face of the world's ugliness? Whether that ugliness is cancer or violence, one connection, one message of love can make all the difference. What I do, what you do, might seem small, but it is vital. We cannot let each other forget that. ➤





Even so, I sometimes struggle to keep my faith in the importance of beauty at a time when heartbreaking news headlines seem to be more frequent. One thing that helps is a note I keep taped beside my desk. The note came from one of my blog readers in response to a post I had written. In the post I wrote that people make magic every day, whether that magic is creating art or tending a garden or raising a child. It was a reminder to myself not to give up when life's struggles seem overwhelming. I hoped that my readers would find encouragement in my words, too. The response was overwhelming.

Sitting here in my garden, savoring the beauty of this summer day, I imagine you reading these words a few months in the future. Are you cozy in a coffee shop sipping chai tea and grabbing a few quiet moments to yourself with a magazine? Have you just pulled out your warm wool coat to wrap up in on the first chilly fall day of the year? Or is it spring where you are? Maybe you're luxuriating in a few moments of reading after hanging up the laundry on a crisp, clear spring day? Wherever you are and whatever it is that's going on in your life, I hope you'll find encouragement in these words — encouragement to be creative, to make connections, and not to doubt the importance of your unique part in this magical world.

Anne Butera is an artist, maker, gardener, and joy collector living with her husband and two rescued greyhounds in a small town in the beautiful Driftless Area of rural Wisconsin. She's passionate about watercolor, and after years of making art has finally begun to embrace sketchbooks. To learn more about Anne and her art, visit her blog at [mygiantstrawberry.com](http://mygiantstrawberry.com) and follow her on Instagram (@mygiantstrawberry).



