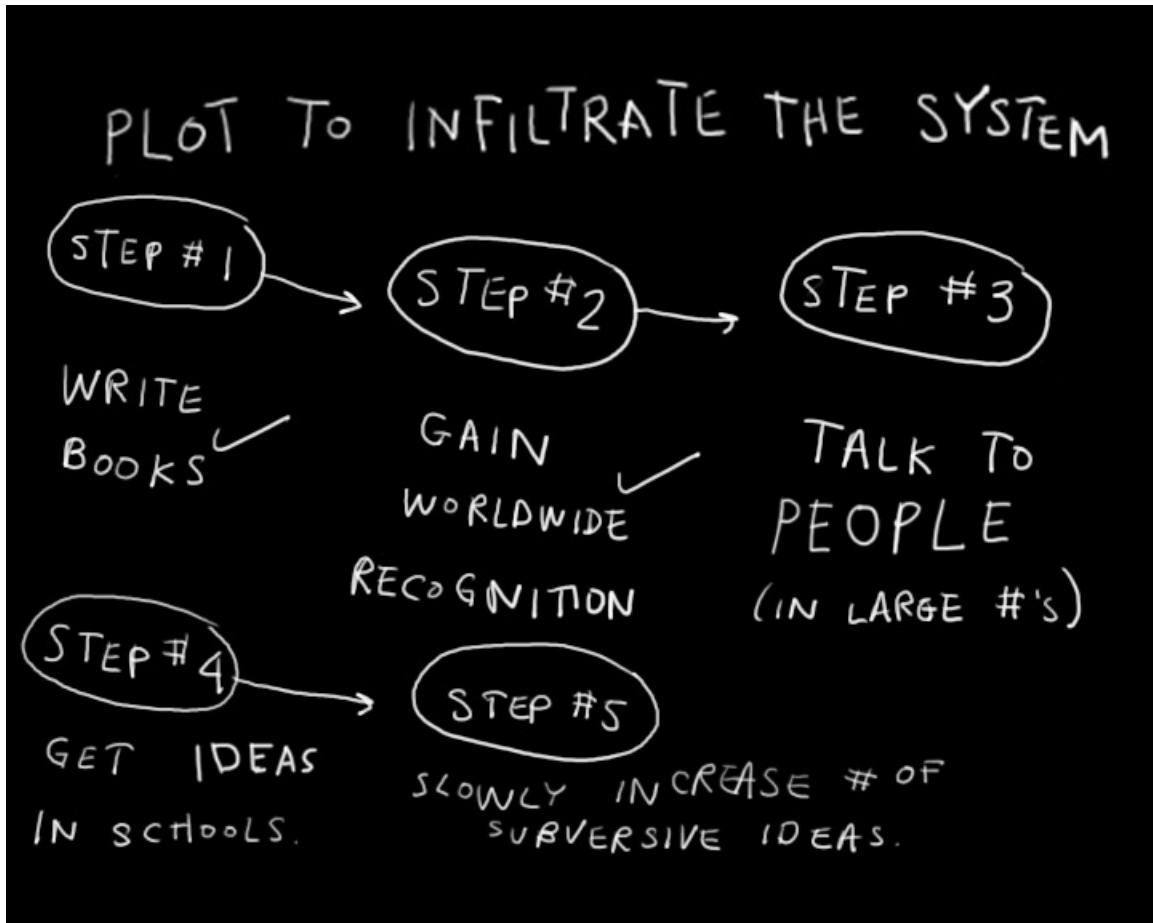


How I Discovered my Secret Powers by Keri Smith

I was very excited to be asked to be a guest blogger for Penguin because for years I have been working on a plot to infiltrate the system and inject it with my subversive ideas.

You represent stage 3 in my plan.



World domination aside, what I really wanted to share with you is a bit about how I was formed as a human being. My story begins like this...

I did not do very well in school. I think my attendance may have had something to do with it.

AVERAGE NUMBER
OF DAYS IN A
SCHOOL YEAR :190

NUMBER OF DAYS
I WAS ABSENT :72

(The only other person who was absent more than me had cancer.)

At a very young age I realized that school was not very fun and

HOME = PLAY

I began to see that my perception of the world was different than the other kids, and that school was largely about making the teacher happy, and had little to do with actual learning. One of my early school memories is me at the age of six noticing that the other kids were getting attention from the teacher because they were struggling with reading. I had learned to read at age four and found all the reading material too easy. Feeling left out I decided to choose a random word and go up to the teacher and ask the pronunciation just so I could have her notice me. The word was “sandwich”. The teacher looked surprised at my asking.

In the book *How Children Fail*, John Holt states:

*When children are very young, they have natural curiosities about the world and explore them, trying diligently to figure out what is real. As they become “producers”, rather than “thinkers”, they fall away from exploration and start fishing for the right answers with little thought. They believe they must always be right, so they quickly forget **mistakes** and how these mistakes were made. They believe that the only good response from the teacher is “yes”, and that a “no” is defeat.*

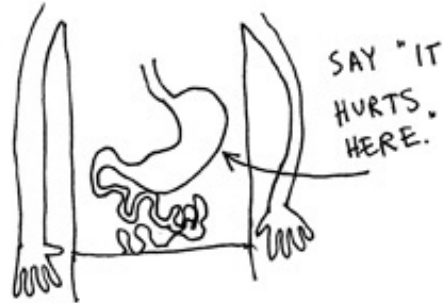
At this point I became very creative. I found as many inventive ways as I could to stay home from school.

I HAD A VARIETY OF TECHNIQUES:



"THE OLD THERMOMETER ON THE LIGHT BULB" TRICK

(TIP: DON'T HOLD TOO
LONG OR IT WILL BREAK.
LEARNED THE HARD WAY.)



THE UNDETECTABLE "STOMACH ACHES."



THE "HEREDITARY MIGRAINES"

JUST LIKE GRANDPA
AND UNCLE JOHN,
AND AUNT MARGE, AND
COUSIN STANLEY.

THE CLASSIC

"THERE'S NOTHING GOING
ON AT SCHOOL BUT AN
ASSEMBLY MOM."

THE ALWAYS SKETCHY AND POTENTIALLY ~~DAG~~ DANGEROUS

"IT'S A P.D.* DAY!"

* PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT

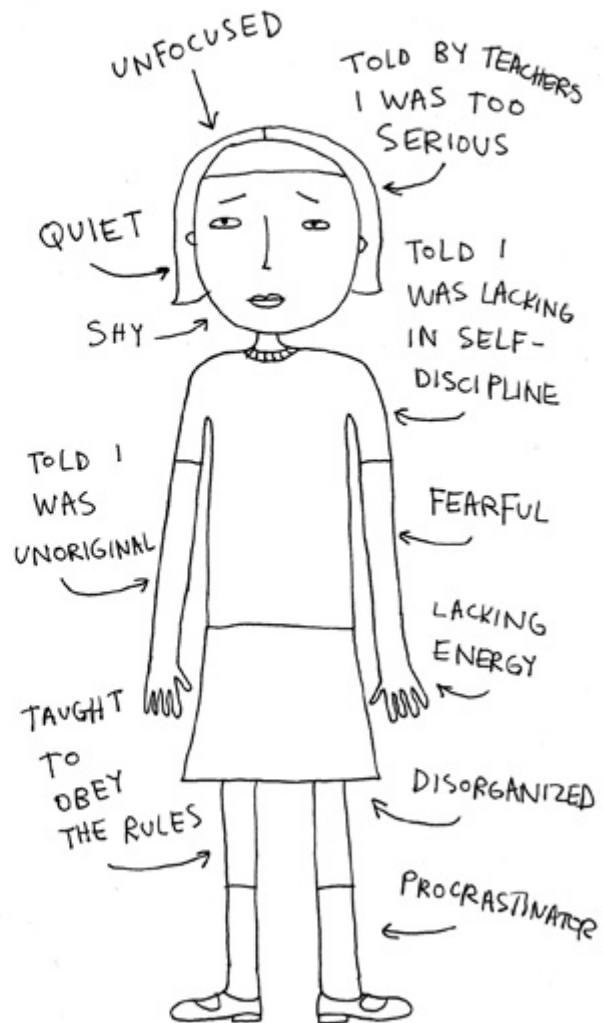
Luckily my parents were bit distracted with work and I was mostly free to stay home, watch tv, and make stuff.

I worked with every medium I could find. I transformed egg cartons into dragons, grey bits of platercine (stolen from school in small increments) into never-ending labyrinthine houses full of secret rooms and tiny furniture. Bags of wool scraps became fodder for dozens of projects, anything from weaving to doll hair; fabric scraps were sewn into a variety of shapes and characters, paper plates into masks worn with fervor.

Every day brought forth unlimited potential for creation.

And then I would have to go back to school again and I would feel suffocated and bored. I was caught between two conflicting worlds.

HOME v.s. SCHOOL

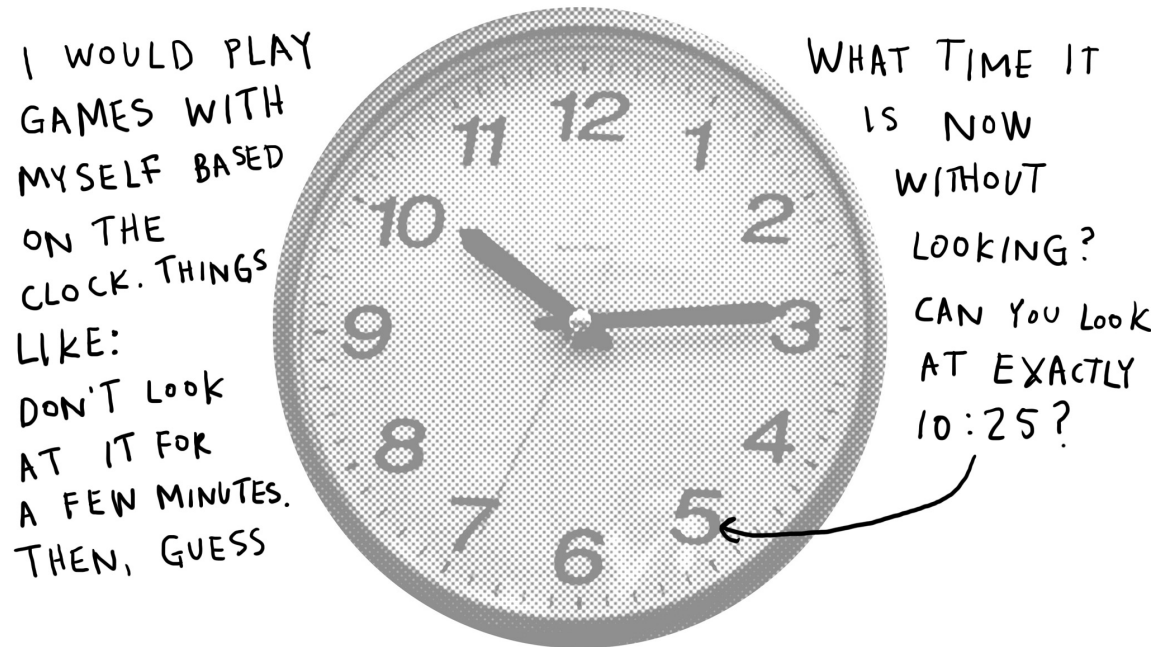


When I was in kindergarten my parents were called in by the teacher for a “meeting.” She had a bucket full of rolled up drawings done by me. She pulled them out and unrolled them one by one. Each page had a drawing of a square house with three windows and a door, an apple tree, and a few clouds scattered about. They were all identical. The teacher expressed concern at my lack of originality.

Looking back now I think my drawing rut reflected my mental state at being forced to go to school. I did what I felt was expected of me. Every day, the same thing. Ad nauseum. I had taken on their perception of me.

But in my private life I became invincible. My imagination ruled.

As I grew I became a seasoned “clock watcher”...



...counting the minutes until the bell. I did the bare minimum of work necessary not to fail. No one asked for anything more from me. And I didn't offer. It was the same for middle school and into high school.

As I struggled with family conflicts, my mother's diagnosis with a terminal illness, and adolescence I became disconnected from my imagination. I felt completely lost. I rebelled against everything and everyone.

In my mind the world was very dark so I wore only black. It was at this point that I began to believe that my failure in high school was due to a deficiency of some kind. Some unavoidable lack of intelligence. I was the stereotype of the white-faced goth kid in the back of the classroom just putting in time until the bell rang so I could go out for a smoke.



I knew I could see things in the world that others could not--to me the world could be much more alive and animated. Objects turned into characters before my very eyes, little messages appeared just for me, I saw what 'could' exist, magical things. But I pushed these thoughts aside because the world told me these they were crazy.

HOW OBJECTS CAN BE TRANSFORMED

(OR WHAT IT'S LIKE IN MY HEAD)

*ONE OF MY SECRET POWERS.

ORDINARY
JUICE LID



THIS IS A



SECRET BUTTON
WHEN PRESSED
MAKES PEOPLE
SING AGAINST
THEIR WILL.

THIS IS A FRIEND



HIS NAME IS GEORGES
(HE'S FRENCH) HE LIKES
LONG WALKS AND
BAGUETTES WITH
CHOCOLATE.



THIS IS A TABLE
FOR VERY SMALL
PEOPLE.

THIS IS THE
HEADQUARTERS



FOR NANOTECHNOLOGY.

THIS IS A CRAZY
OCTOPUS MONSTER



My silenced imagination left me feeling sad and hopeless about the world. In 1986, a break-up with a boyfriend resulted in my isolation from friends and family. To ease the pain, I took an overdose of pills and put myself in the hospital. After that, in an attempt to heal I began what I call “my research.” I was on a quest to find meaning, an explanation of what it means to be human.

I began to read.

Not the books that were assigned in school. I found respite in authors who didn’t just live in their imagination but somehow ‘became’ it. Madeline L’Engle, C.S. Lewis, John Wyndam, Asimov, Robert Pirsig. These led me to others, and thus I began my lifelong journey as an autodidact. After not graduating from high school, I got the only job I was qualified to do: working full time in a bookstore¹.

Because I couldn’t get into university, I acquired a reading list from a friend for her English Literature 101 class. I actually believed that due to my lack of intelligence I might not be able to get through these novels. On the list were the Brontës, Austen, Thackeray, Hemingway. After finishing each one I found myself amazed. Not only could I understand it, I reveled in it. I became insatiable. I tore through Dostoevsky and Turney, and Tolstoy. Flung myself into Orwell, Huxley, and Vonnegut. Then onto Salinger, Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner. Nothing was out of my reach.

And then I had a thought (a few thoughts actually)...

What if everything I had been taught about myself in school was wrong?

What if the opposite of everything was true?

What if I had the power to create anything that I conceived of?

What if the world was magic and I was able to see things that others could not for a reason?

¹ One of the skills I learned while working in the bookstore was an ability to distinguish publishers by the smell of the ink. Penguin Classics was one that I always got right. In those days the printing smells were a lot more distinctive than they are today.

OLD IBM ADAGE:

**IF YOU CAN'T FIX IT,
FEATURE IT.**

2

I found out about a loophole in the Canadian school system where I could apply to college as a “mature student” after being out of school for a few years, and they wouldn’t look at my marks. I applied to art school and got in. There I was exposed to a whole new world, one where I was at the helm and in completely in charge of my own life/research. **My life became my research project**, I was determined to mine my teachers and the books for the answers to everything.

² my dad worked for IBM in the education dept. where they taught this on a regular basis.

THINGS I WAS EXPOSED TO:



ZEN BUDDHISM



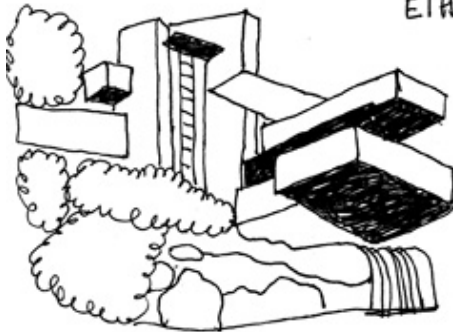
CONCEPTUAL ART



JAPANESE CULTURE



ETHNIC FOOD



MODERN ARCHITECTURE



GUERRILLA ART

STRUCTURALISM
FEMINISM
EXISTENTIALISM
- AND A WHOLE
HOST OF OTHER
"ISMS"

POSTMODERNISM



TOM ROBBINS



CARL JUNG



CITY LIFE

I loved this new life of research. I had thoughts and ideas and opinions and it was glorious. When my classes finished, I found myself literally running to the nearest bookstore to get more information. I looked at everything as a tourist would (including my own life), as if I had never seen it before. I took extensive notes. And did drawings of the world around me, like an explorer in an unexplored land. I learned that my

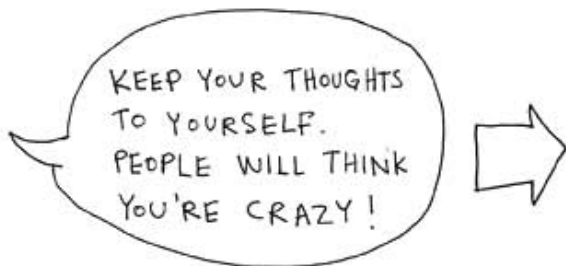
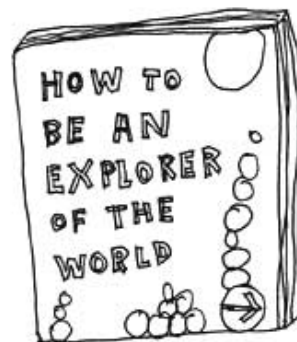
perspective was unique and was amazed to find that others responded favorably to what I was doing.

Very slowly I began to experiment with my ideas. Instead of listening to the fears I had developed over fourteen years of schooling, I began to question everything. The rebel in me moved to the forefront. I found other rebels to serve as role models. What if we 'did' the opposite of what we were taught? What would happen?

Some of my responses came out in book form:

WHAT WE ARE TOLD...

MY RESPONSE...



The books mimic my own process. Part deconstruction, part re-enchantment of everyday life. Break things down, tear them apart, then shape them into something. I try to see what it is like to be free from convention, and how it feels to go to the limits of your imagination. I want to enter fully into an experiment, that place of being open to the unknown. The realm of uncertainty. The leaping off point.

“Since we can’t know what knowledge will be most needed in the future, it is senseless to try to teach it in advance. Instead, we should try to turn out people who love learning so much and learn so well that they will be able to learn whatever needs to be learned.” –john holt

One thing I have learned from my life so far is that creative thought gives individuals a sense of ownership over their world. And this is what I aim to share with others. I do not see myself as any kind of expert on anything; what I have to offer is an intense passion for learning. As I found with the greatest teachers I have had over the years, this passion is infectious.

To this effect I leave you with a few thoughts:

1. YOU ARE INVINCIBLE.
2. YOU CAN CREATE YOUR OWN WORLDS/UNIVERSES.
3. CONVENTION SUCKS.
4. MISTAKES ARE GOOD (AS LONG AS THEY DON'T KILL YOU.)
5. THE ANSWERS ARE EVERYWHERE.
6. READING IS CRUCIAL.
AND MOST IMPORTANTLY...
7. QUESTION EVERYTHING.