



## Growing back into art

by Rick Belden

Art has been an important mode of creative expression for me throughout my entire life. As a child, I spent countless hours with pencils, crayons, scissors, paper, cardboard, paste, and tape making multitudes of little art objects in a process that came as naturally to me as breathing. I loved artmaking and couldn't imagine ever not doing it. I even had dreams of being an artist when I grew up.

As I began the transition from childhood to adolescence, my relationship with my artist self began to sever for a number of reasons. I was impatient with my developing skills and immature in my expectations of myself, and there was no one in my life to mentor and guide me through those traps. I'd also begun to come to an innate understanding that I was going to be on my own in the world very soon and that art (like writing, which I also loved) was unlikely to provide the means for me to make a living.

Finally, I was painfully aware that I was already widely regarded as both sensitive and a nerd (two very negative social labels for an adolescent boy) and therefore saw pursuing my artistic impulses as yet another strike against a fledgling masculinity that was constantly being questioned, scrutinized, and challenged, not only at school by other kids (boys and girls alike), teachers, and coaches, but at home by my own father.

Under the weight of all that, my art and my artist went underground [along with several other key aspects of my personality](#) during my high school years. They still snuck out into the light here and there: in the mechanical drawing classes I took for a year

(thinking I might become a draftsman); in the model rockets I designed, built, and painted; in the illustrations I drew for my first poetry collection and unfinished novella. There were plenty of doodles and cartoons drawn randomly and spontaneously as well, but by and large, my focus had moved to other things, and consequently, any potential I might have had as an artist was never fully developed and actualized.

Throughout my late teens and twenties, I no longer thought of myself as an artist at all. Like so many of the aspects of my identity that had been lost, given up, or stripped away from me as I struggled to find my way to adulthood, my artist self had become almost a total stranger to me, distant and nearly forgotten as if it was only part of some very old dream I once had. But again, as in high school, it continued to express itself occasionally, when and where it could.

When my writer self began to reawaken in my late twenties, my artist self found ways to join, facilitate, and support the process. For many years, I journaled in spiral-bound notebooks and each one was filled to bursting not only with words, but also with little drawings and all sorts of images cut from comic books, magazines, etc. and pasted in collage-style to accompany the writing. I also created a cover for each journal, front and back, typically a collage or illustration of some sort, and gave the journal a title. Unconsciously and completely without intention, I was making art again, but I didn't see it as art and I still didn't see or think of myself as an artist.

Nevertheless, my artist self, still unrecognized and largely disowned by me on a conscious level, continued to express and assert its energy in my life, and was instrumental in the process that led to the development, creation, and publication of my first book, [\*Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood\*](#). As previously recounted in my essay "[My life with Iron Man](#)", my life during my early thirties was, for a time, taken over and redirected by a series of dreams involving the Marvel Comics character Iron Man, with whom I'd been very taken as a child. Artmaking came to be an important element in the creative process of working through the mysteries presented to me by those dreams.

The collages I made during this period using Iron Man images cut from old comic books were a direct, active link to my childhood artmaking, when I also took the scissors to comic books, cutting out images of Iron Man and other superheroes and gluing them to cardboard to use as "action figures" for play. One particularly large collage, a montage of numerous Iron Man comic book images that spoke to me as being most representative of the themes and energies being expressed in my dreams, was the direct precursor to [the wonderful artwork](#) created by John Dolley (with my input and collaboration on concepts) that ultimately appeared in my book.

Twenty-five years later, it's easy for me to see, although I wasn't fully aware of it at the time, that the *Iron Man Family Outing* project was every bit as art driven, every bit the product of an artist, as it was the product of a writer, a dreamer, and a poet. Even so, I

still have trouble seeing and thinking of myself as an artist, but the evidence seems to be mounting that I am. I've continued to create art, here and there in various ways, when time and opportunity have made it possible and the creative impulse was engaged and undeniable. I remain skeptical of my own skills, still never fully or properly developed, and the products of my efforts tend to be pretty rough around the edges, but the creative energy is consistently clear, strong, and pure, and the information expressed when intuition and unconscious are given voice is often surprisingly eloquent.

Does that make me an artist? I suppose it does. Have I grown up to be an artist, as I dreamed I might as a child? Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I'm *growing back* into it.

Image: [Solar Elephant](#) by Rick Belden.



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Rick Belden is a respected explorer and chronicler of the psychology and inner lives of men. His book, [Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood](#), is widely used in the United States and internationally by therapists, counselors, and men's groups as an aid in the exploration of masculine psychology and men's issues, and as a resource for men who grew up in dysfunctional, abusive, or neglectful family systems. His second book, [Scapegoat's Cross: Poems about Finding and Reclaiming the Lost Man Within](#), is currently awaiting publication. He lives in Austin, Texas.

More information, including excerpts from Rick's books, is available on his [website](#) and [blog](#). You can also find him on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).