

an excerpt from:

Facing the Beasts:

Everybody's a Critic

A pictorial and illuminating booklet
on the beastly habit of criticism

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Illustrations by the author



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DEDICATED With gratitude to my husband Randy, a fellow seeker and
caring critic.

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet is the first in a series excerpted from my longer book, *Facing the Beasts*. It is an account of how I hunted down and eventually stood face to face with my own beasts. The tools for beast hunting were a fertile imagination and a paint brush. The motivation was dismay that I seemed to have developed certain negative mental habits that made me suffer. I was tired of repeating myself. In order to change these patterns, I learned to see the habits as creatures. Over a five year period I engaged in a visual stake-out, watching my emotions and eventually capturing 16 images of dastardly, pathetic, gloomy and amusing beasts, including creatures filled with self-criticism, self pity, rage and arrogance.

I experienced a beneficial reduction in emotional pain after I met and depicted each beast. In the effort to make each creature as gloomy and dark as possible, I distorted their faces and bodies in weird and exaggerated ways, making each animal grotesque. This meant that while the beasts could be dark, they could also be funny. Developing a sense of humor about my own foibles began to set me free.

In this booklet, I explore one of the most pervasive beasts in our daily lives: the habit of criticism and judgment. The excesses of criticism afflict many of us. We may be relentlessly self-critical, cruel and judgmental of others, inordinately sensitive to criticism, or unaware of how our opinions are received by others. In the course of my own dialogue with criticism, I have tried to answer this question: Can we evolve from destructive critical beasts, freeing ourselves from the criticism of self and others; to creative thinkers who use critical feedback for growth and awareness?

EVERYBODY'S A CRITIC

Every fall for the past few years we've had massive hatches of Asian lady beetles at our house. The little orange insects congregate in great numbers on the siding, and many of them find their way indoors. The most hateful thing about these bugs is that sometimes when they land on my body, they take a bite! From the winter through spring I am vacuuming live lady beetles, and lady beetle corpses, which stink. They seem to be everywhere.

The ever-present lady beetle is a good metaphor for the human habit of criticism which I started to observe as I began to pay attention to my human foibles and responses. Like lady beetles, criticism exists everywhere humans congregate. We publicly criticize and condemn the actions of elected officials; much of our news is criticism and responses to criticism. Every difference of opinion that occurs in family life—the clothes we wear, the way we spend money, our habits of cleanliness, how we spend our time, our political or sports preferences all can be sources of criticism. In my line of work, writing, illustration and fine art, criticism can be the source of despair, improvement, frustration or clarity.

Sometimes criticism can be constructive, for example, when I have asked for advice or feedback on a creative project. When I am struggling or having difficulties, the right kind of criticism can get me unstuck. Constructive criticism may be perceived as an attack if I am feeling down or pessimistic. Then, I am unable to hear what is being said.

Everyone has different habitual ways of delivering criticism; for some it's a direct verbal attack, for others it is revealed in snide remarks, raised eyebrows, or behind the back carping. We also have habitual modes of receiving criticism. I've often taken criticism very seriously, as if it was the absolute truth. This can have ruinous effects. In high school I was an amateur thespian and appeared in several community theater productions. My best role was as Emily in the play "Our Town," and I glowed after I received compliments in a

local newspaper review. Several months after this I was mis-cast in a comedic role in "School for Scandal," a 17th century farce. As an introverted and serious high school student, I found it hard to identify with a frivolous and mannered bimbo. The local newspaper reviewer commented that I looked "wooden" on-stage, and I was devastated. My stage fright increased exponentially, and I never tried out for a play again.

Frequently criticism is delivered with a bite, like the lady beetles. All too often, the intention of the critic is purely destructive: to attack, disable, stop, hurt, change or redirect whatever the critic would like to change. Criticism can be blind. Difference is criticized and rejected based on simplistic labels, as when conservatives criticize liberals, democrats criticize republicans, straights criticize gays, and animal lovers criticize hunters. It is very easy to trot out our stock criticisms of the groups we most love to hate.

Criticism has useful purposes too. It can be necessary when we want to succeed in a common enterprise. We need to figure out how to give criticism and take criticism, so we can move forward, improve, and achieve personal or common goals. After all, we will receive criticism for everything we do, or even receive criticism for doing nothing.

The Sharp-Toothed Critic

I first began to understand the nature of criticism when I was visiting my parents in Wisconsin. While these visits often had their pleasant aspects, sometimes the most minor events could set us both off. The last morning of this particular visit I got up early, as was my habit, ate breakfast, and retired to the living room to ponder and write in my journal. I loved quiet mornings and my mind was often burbling with ideas that I wanted to think about or write down. My mother, in contrast, woke up in a talkative frame of mind, wanting to watch and discuss the morning TV shows. Finally, peeved at my monosyllabic responses, she criticized. With wounded intensity, I

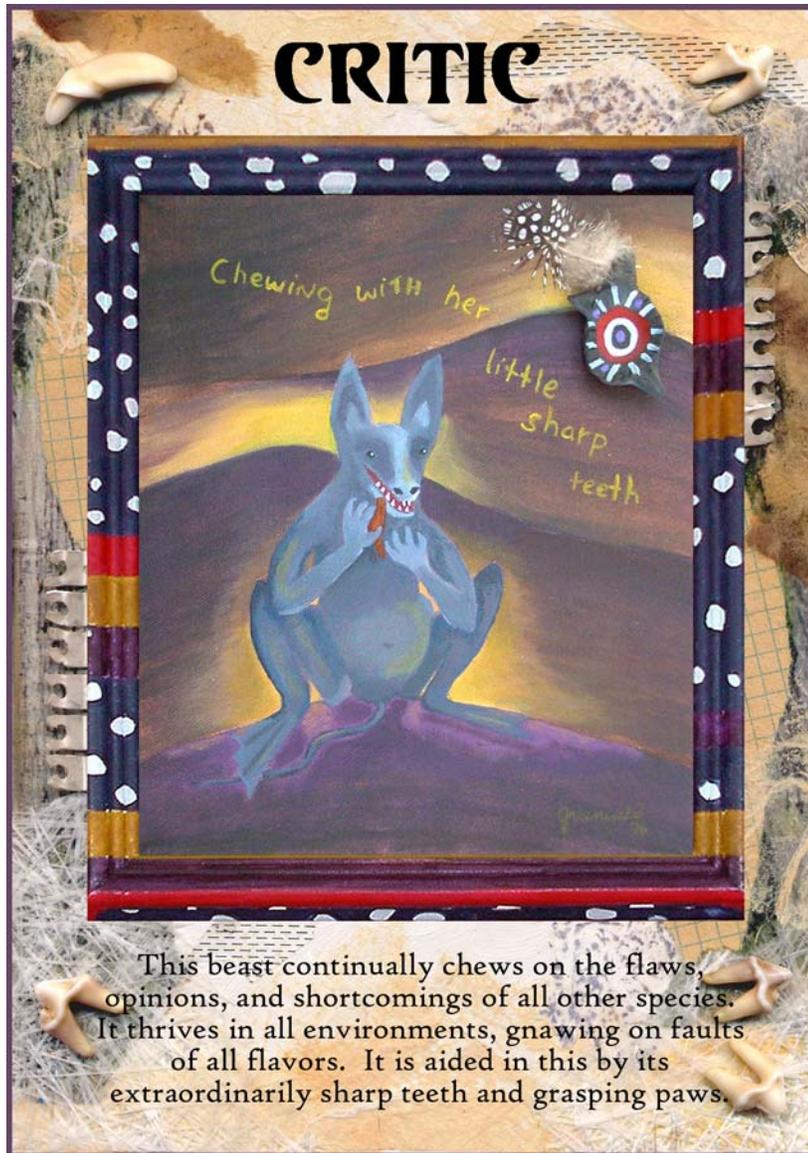
lashed back. We both retreated to opposite corners of the house in an irritated mood.

On the four hour drive back to Minnesota later that day, I replayed the exchange over and over in my mind, unable to let it go. Somehow, a lot of the unfinished business in our relationship bubbled to the surface, as my emotional response was out of proportion to the actual insult.

Frustrated that I seemed unable to forget the argument, I went to my studio when I returned home and did a pencil sketch and then a painting of a dark ugly sharp-toothed animal, chewing on a piece of red meat. I wanted to capture what the argument looked like, and tried to make the image as dark and frightening as I could, attempting to match the foul bitterness and tenacity of my mental state.

When this small 8" x 10" work was completed, I stood next to it, viewing the two of us, creature and creator, in a large mirror. "This is not me," I observed, looking at the dark animal, and for the first time I felt my heart lift in a gesture of release from the toxicity of the argument.

Several weeks later, Sally Brown, a Minneapolis artist and teacher, gazed at the piece I now call "The Critic", alongside about 20 of my other paintings. I periodically sought out her constructive and critical insights on my artwork. "Do more of these," she said, pointing at the Critic, which I thought was the ugliest painting in the bunch. But I took her advice, and started a process that generated a host of grotesque creatures and collages in the same vein over the ensuing years.



A variety of motivations contributed to this enthusiastic response. Pure frustration with the seeming intractability of my mental processes certainly figured powerfully into the creation of the Critic. Even though I had spent years of reflection, therapy, journaling and introspection, keeping depression at bay was a constant preoccupation. It was frustrating that my reasoning skills seemed incapable of revealing why this was occurring, or how I could prevent it. With Brown's encouragement, the next images emerged rapidly. Once I had discovered this metaphorical approach for understanding my feelings, I didn't want to let it go. It was

almost as if I had spent years trying to walk on a floor slippery with soap, and suddenly, with these images, I gained traction.

Was I the Critic, or was my mother? We both were, though I didn't realize this at first. Painting the Critic allowed me to make a radical perceptual shift, and realize that I had a choice about whether or not to identify with my Critic. I started to learn more about what this creature was like. Once I had the measure of her personality, I started to recognize her attributes in a few other people. Like me, these people had a raging Critic both outside and in, constantly tormenting them and chewing on all their mistakes. Facing the Critic head-on not only had a cathartic effect, but it made me feel hopeful that I would find the courage to face other difficulties. It marked the beginning of the end of fear. A week or so after completing this painting, I had the following dream:

I was walking on a rope bridge in an area where someone had reported the presence of ghosts. The lens cap fell off my camera and rolled to the floor of the bridge. I dropped down to my hands and knees in the dark to look for it, and immediately became aware of a sinister presence. I closed my eyes, and a ghoulish creature appeared. I could see that it was similar to the one I had painted. My fears instantly vanished.

I had seen fear face-to-face in my dream, and discovered that it was something I had created. The dream was the first indication of how helpful this creative process could be. If I could envision and then depict a negative quality that had been occupying my mind, I could make its toxic qualities vanish.

My feelings about criticism began to evolve. At first, I simply felt relief when I realized that this biting chewing creature was not me, or at least, that she didn't represent my whole self. I could see that the Critic was one-dimensional in terms of its attributes, while I was clearly multi-dimensional. In other words, I could be critical at times, but I could also be kind, helpful and so on.

I came to realize that I had an internal critic who functioned independently of my external critics. This internal beast was constantly interpreting, reacting to, and amplifying the importance of

unreturned phone calls, facial expressions, cranky store clerks or hostile drivers. She reacted with hair-trigger defensiveness every time she was criticized. Sometimes, she got depressed because she completely identified with the criticism. The Critic's sense of self-esteem fluctuated like the barometric pressure: if she had been criticized, she was down, and if she had earned approval, she was up.

The most challenging aspect of the Critic was the fact that she seemed to operate automatically; it was very difficult to become aware of her presence. She was hyper-aware of all faults, and relentlessly unforgiving of mistakes. She was biting in her appraisal of her own thoughts and actions, but was also critical of others. I had very negative feelings about the Critic. I saw it as an opponent, and described it as one of my demons.

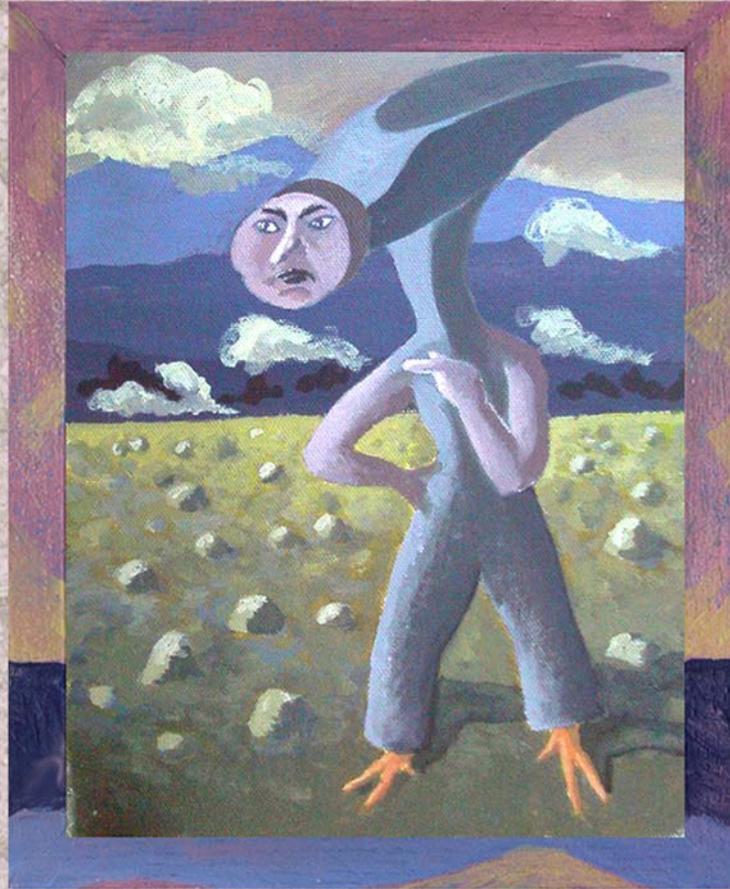
I started to see that other people also identified strongly with their own Critics, sometimes very noisy ones. An overbearing man I had never liked was much given to smirking criticisms which seemed to emerge every time he opened his mouth. I felt sorry for him that he seemed so unaware of this.

Then I gradually realized that I also had the habit of broadcasting my criticism around far and wide in a similar manner, though I seldom verbalized these judgments. I was discouraged that this critical activity was so pervasive. I came to realize that this critical commentary created distance between me and other people.

The Hard-Nosed Scold

My heightened awareness of criticism led me to create another related beast, The Scold, several years later. The nature of the Scold is to be outraged about many things. It chatters in my head. Its habit is to condemn the behavior and attitudes of others, egotistically believing her own understanding or approach is better. The Scold engages in a continually critical commentary about the world. She has a rigid sense of superiority: her head is a hammer and other's mistakes are nails that she is ready to pound on.

SCOLD



The common scold is a carping creature, with a huffing, muffled call: hmpf, hmpf, hmpf. Its stiff gait matches its unbending critical view of the world. Uses its index finger to ferret out new situations and events to condemn.

I had an acquaintance I'll call Vanessa, who brought me into frequent contact with my Scold. I began to realize that I was relentlessly judging her, and my attitude was leaking out in small sarcasms and barbs. Life circumstances kept throwing us together, so I felt frustrated by the distance my own judging attitude was creating.

In most interactions, these judgments occur at the speed of light. Something about the person may immediately strike us as wrong, or unpleasant, and the Scold has instantaneously dug a toe-hold into the situation. In a slow-motion review of my critical appraisal of Vanessa, I see that it started immediately with a perception of difference: this person is different from me in some noticeable way. Since everyone we meet is different, the Critic or Scold is ready for action from the get-go. When we encounter someone who is different, we rapidly reach for our internal grab-box of the labels we attach to difference. Someone is too noisy, materialistic, authoritarian, studious, picky, pushy, wishy-washy, religious, inefficient, or any one of a host of our favorite critical labels.

The next thing that may make us quick to criticize is the whole history of our previous encounters with the person. Do we feel loved and appreciated by the person, or judged ourselves? If we intuitively believe we are being judged that can automatically move us into a defensive critical stance. Our history with the person may include episodes of conflict, where we have been victimized, betrayed, or let down. These histories rush back to mind in a millisecond.

I believe that Vanessa, too, struggled with our differences. We never discussed this issue, however. For a period of time, I tried to prevent my judgments from dominating our entire relationship. Things began to change when I consciously brought the image of the Scold to mind when I was with her. Suddenly, I saw how cruel and unbending I was, how rigid my attitude. Gradually, the whole context of our relationship began to change, and our exchanges began to exhibit a relaxed and friendly quality that had never before been present.

The Scold is a tough creature. She is a snarling cousin of the Critic. Everybody's a scold, or everybody's a critic. We hear these creature's voices on the lips anyone who has ever complained about their family, co-workers, the political system, the press, celebrities or the local sports team. They are very difficult to avoid.

Some will argue that there's a place for scolding or criticism. If we accept everything that happens to us, we could become a doormat. Everyone does not have our best interests at heart, and persuasive criticism may be needed to discuss and highlight different points of view. Even if I set the goal of remaining calm and uncritical in my conversations, the people with whom I interact might have very different goals. They may see no benefits in reining in their vociferous criticisms, even though I may see their attitude as destructive. It is very difficult to change other people. But the whole quality of relationships and human interactions changes when, instead of labeling the shortcomings of others, we start to recognize our own Critic.

I try to keep my eyes peeled for the actions of the Critic and the Scold, and increasingly, I am able to disarm them. This process has healing effects. It begins with self-acceptance. I learn to accept and let go of all those critical labels that I put on myself. I no longer define myself as too serious, sensitive, worried, quiet, indecisive or critical. It's true that these are some of my human issues, but I need not become identified with a negative label. Gradually, my acceptance is extended to others. Everyone I meet has their own baggage of humanity, foibles that I would find it easy to criticize. But if I can reduce the amount of critical aggression I bring to a situation, my relationships become easier.

The disarmament of my Critic has helped me to have some compassion for those who criticize. It has improved my relationship with a fellow critic, my mother, immensely. If we see what is going on within ourselves, we can make some choices about whether we will act on our emotions. In many cases, bringing the Critic and the Scold to consciousness has helped me to break emotional gridlocks, and stop feeling so alienated and cut-off from everyone.

The critical beast I painted spends a lot of time chewing. I tend to gobble my food rapidly, sometimes barely tasting it before it is consumed. If I could take an attitude toward issues and relationships that the Critic takes towards food, I could chew on them slowly,

continuously and thoughtfully. This could help me avoid making criticisms that simply rehash my own conventional wisdom. Such an attitude might bring to mind alternate viewpoints, facts that could be checked, different world or cultural views that could be considered. Putting ourselves in other's shoes can dissipate our critical attitude toward them. This action makes may make us realize how complex issues are, challenging the black and white categories or labels that make us scold or criticize.

An aware Critic exhibits an openness to really taste the information that is missing in so much criticism. The attacking critical beast could metamorphose into a critical thinker, weighing, discriminating, assessing and evaluating what is being said. I continually re-experience the challenge of learning to be this kind of critic.

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Martha Greenwald is an interdisciplinary artist, writer and social entrepreneur who works independently on issues related to art, psychology, spirituality, environmental sustainability and social change. She studied geography, Spanish and art history in Wisconsin and Madrid, Spain, and then went on to begin a career in city planning and public policy. A spiritual transformation in Bogota, Colombia eventually led her to a career change, and she began to practice art and read extensively, delving deeply into Jungian

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Martha Greenwald now lives in Winona, Minnesota, where she continues to make art, write, hold workshops, and contribute to social change efforts.

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