

# Creative Busy Work

by Kim Switzer



I wasn't going to write an article this month. Instead, I was going to send out a brief note with apologies and promise to see you all in April. See, it's been a really hard two months, and March has been the worst of it. Two months ago, we found out my mother has cancer. She spent the first three weeks of March at Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, and we weren't hearing good news. All of this came to a head with me making an emergency trip out there (39 hours each way by train!) to be there for her surgery last week because they weren't sure she would pull through. Happily, she did way better than they expected, we have some hope now, and I've been home for a few days and am feeling mostly human again.

I'm guessing you can see why I thought about skipping this. But then I thought about how many of us have to deal with chaos and drama like this in our lives. And we need to be there for each other, offering support and, when we can, ideas about how to get through.

So what do you do when emotions and life are overwhelming you, you need a break, something to take your mind off things and give you a break, but you don't have the energy or focus to get really deep into your creativity? Busy work!

What is busy work in relation to creativity? It's not like those worksheets with games on it the teachers used to give us on the last day of school before Christmas break. Creative busy work is actually stuff that needs to get done, but it doesn't require the depth of attention or mental energy that the trickier parts of our creative work often require of us.

While I was fretting about my mother and getting ready for—and more and more anxious about—my trip, I did a few things. Some of these carried over into the trip itself and helped me keep calm while I was traveling. Here's what I did:

- Made lists of art supplies I might want in a travel kit
- Gathered my supplies and packed them into a couple of small zippered bags

- Cut up papers and made a small, pamphlet style journal
- Copied bird patterns from a book and transferred them to some linen for an embroidery project
- Sifted through and sorted threads and picked the ones I needed for my bird project
- Wound embroidery thread into small balls or onto bobbins
- Embroidered bird outlines
- Browsed through art/craft magazines and marked projects I might want to try later

Some other things you can do for creative busy work:

- Doodle flowers or shapes in your journal then color them in with pencils, crayons, watercolors, markers
- Paint backgrounds in your art journal or for use later in mixed media projects
- Wind yarn into balls for your next knitting or crochet project
- Cut out fabric squares for a quilting project
- Make lists of projects you'd like to try
- Cut or tear images out of magazines
- Sort images and ephemera for your journal

These are short lists just to give you some ideas, of course. Your own list may look quite different from mine depending on what arts you practice. Your lists might look different depending on whether the situation you're in will require travel or having company, too.

When we're in the middle of an emotional upheaval, we often think that we don't have time to do creative things, but in reality we can't afford not to. Your creativity can help you stay calm and centered, help you breathe and think and process your emotions. If you're stressed and anxious, or if you're getting ready to head into a high stress situation, do yourself a favor and make sure to make space for your creative work. It really is worth the bit of extra time and effort and the space in the luggage.