

There's More To Asking Than Just Art

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ANNALISA QUINN

The Art of Asking

Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Let People Help

by Amanda Palmer and Brene Brown

Amanda Palmer's well-intentioned, slightly clueless new book, *The Art of Asking*, is a little bit diary, a little bit TED talk, and a little bit how-to guide. Palmer, Neil Gaiman's wife and one-half of the band the Dresden Dolls, had a well-publicized break from her record label and asked her fans to front the money for her next venture via Kickstarter. She asked for \$100,000 — and received \$1.2 million. From this successful experiment in asking for help, she has produced a hazy philosophy of asking, built on the pillars of trust, reciprocity, couch-surfing and a lot of body paint.

But in thinking about the art of asking, Palmer misses its most basic tenet: In our society, certain kinds of people are allowed to ask for things, and certain kinds of people are not. She writes as though the biggest obstacle to getting the help you need is a reluctance to ask — not, say, ingrained social structures having to do with race and class.

Who is allowed to ask for help? Who is heard when they ask for help? Whom do people want to help? These are basic questions that get little or no attention in *The Art of Asking*. Instead, we are coached in letting other people help us: "Your acceptance of the gift IS the gift," she says.

Palmer accidentally hits on truth when she writes, "Effective crowdfunding is not about relying on the kindness of strangers, it's about relying on the kindness of your crowd." "Your crowd" is the crucial phrase. Here, she's of course talking about her fans — as opposed to random strangers. But the uncomfortable, unexamined reality behind her thesis is that you must have a fairly wealthy, leisured and skilled fan base in the first place. Not everyone can ask their crowd for help, because not everyone has a crowd that can help.

Palmer's admirable, if fuzzy, conviction that we are bound together by innate, shared humanity sometimes feels like an excuse to avoid considering people as individuals. "We're all the same on the inside!" is not that far from "Everyone is like me!" which is not that far from "My perspective is universal!" Her point about asking still stands — it is good to ask for help and support from the people around you — but a little more thought about what asking might mean for people other than Amanda Palmer would be welcome.

Musician Amanda Palmer says she learned about trust and giving when she was a street performer.

TED RADIO HOUR

How Do You Get People To Pay For Music?

Palmer's best and worst feature is a chronic inability to understand how she comes across to other people. On the one hand, this lends a wonderful genuineness to her writing. On the other, it often makes her sound like a complete heel.

In a passage about the bombing at the Boston Marathon, she writes, "Everybody wanted to help each other. I twittered over five hundred times that day." Here, she is probably trying to make a point about the way tragedy prompts connection and communication among strangers. But when juxtaposed with the magnitude of the tragedy and the actions of people who responded in tangible, risky ways (first responders, say), the statement about "twittering" makes her sound like a self-regarding jerk. And that's a failure of communication and taste, not necessarily of ethics.

Amanda Palmer and The Grand Theft Orchestra during Tiny Desk at NPR. (Kainaz Amaria/NPR)

TINY DESK CONCERTS

Amanda Palmer And The Grand Theft Orchestra: Tiny Desk Concert

Similarly, the fact that she got huge amounts of money from her Kickstarter campaign and yet offered to pay her volunteer musicians in hugs and beer shows a real ignorance of context and scale. It's another basic principle of human interaction: What is acceptable in one context is not always acceptable in another context.

But there are worse things than having little sense of optics or propriety. Amanda Palmer's book has a strong, if nuanceless, ethical underpinning, and she is clearly thinking actively about how best to be kind and fair to the people around her. And that's not nothing.

The Art of Asking: Amanda Palmer Opens Her Heart to the World

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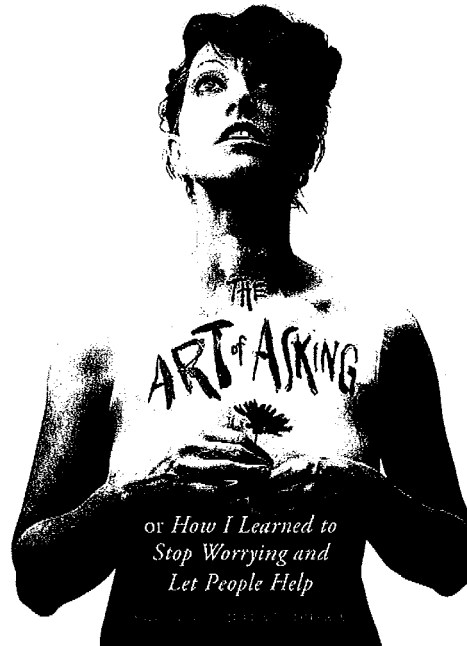
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Holly Cara Price
Agent Provocateur

The Art of Asking is a book unlike any other I've ever read, and I mean that sincerely. Amanda Palmer, who since her wildly successful and globally infamous Kickstarter campaign in 2012, has now reached the type of fame that invites mass adulation as well as those who line up to take potshots at anything they feel is politically incorrect, has written a book I'd have no problem recommending to everyone I know. My mother, my best friend, my work friends, my Facebook friends, my LinkedIn contacts, even the people I meet on the street or see on the subway when I commute to and from work. It's that important and that groundbreaking. This book is not just someone's brave and personal journey from childhood to her life as an artist, but it also addresses why and how it's so hard to look into someone else's eyes and be real, and ask for help when we need it.

I'm deadly serious when I tell you that this book is exactly what I needed to read right now. Palmer has, not to put too fine a point on it, ripped open her chest and exposed her heart for all to see. She's written her truth - and it's at once brutal and gloriously, importantly beautiful. I spoke to her recently about the book and what it took to get to this day.

AMANDA PALMER



The Art of Asking by Amanda Palmer

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Holly: This book is exactly what I needed at this moment in my life. I want to profoundly thank you. I've written all over the pages and I also love Brené Brown's introduction.

Amanda: She nailed it... I fell in love with her book (*Daring Greatly*) and she was the first person I asked, I just met her on Twitter. I said - I am reading your book

and basically, we've written the same book, Brené. You are writing about it as a researcher and an academic and a statistician, but holy fuck, every page of your book is reflecting every page of mine, I'm freaking out. And I just said - will you write the introduction? ... Of course, it didn't occur to me, I kind of got sad when I thought about it, but I'm a weird artist and all these people out there are going to maybe be intimidated by me or intimidated that this book isn't for them and I don't want them to think that and Brené just opens the door and says - nope, it's for you too.

Holly: Now I have to read her book because of what you just said, but I can tell by the introduction that she's really totally worlds apart from you... I don't know anything about her, I really don't, but she just seems like my Mom.

Amanda: She totally is your Mom. You should read *Daring Greatly*. It was like my bible, the month I started writing the book. I was so moved by it that I cite it three times in the book because it was just coincidence that all these studies came out that she was doing, just basically, [she was] just backing me up with data.

Holly: I love the part in her intro where she says she would be the person who would walk by the statue and wouldn't talk to the statue and would just give money and then scuttle on her way [Amanda supported herself at one time as a living statue in Boston]. It's just really moving. We don't have time for me to tell you what it means to me, but your bravery and your honesty and just baring your soul about all these topics - it just blows my mind how honest and truthful this book is. The other thing that occurred to me is that the book is kind of like the text equivalent of you just falling backward into the crowd and letting them hold you up.

Amanda: Yeah. It is. I mean, it was a hard book to write knowing that putting it out I was going to be opening myself back up in the line of fire. Because I am still kind of dealing with it...and I'm really scared. I don't want to go back to all of those places. I don't want to have endless discussions where I am defending all of my decisions, it's like I've fucking walked through the fire already, I came out scarred and burned and I don't want to go back in. That was over. That was 2012. It was all terrible. And I had to add an epilogue right before the book went to print - Anthony going into the fucking hospital in a week for a bone marrow transplant and he might not live [Her oldest and dearest friend, Anthony, is currently undergoing treatment for leukemia].

Holly: What was your process to write the book? How long did it take?

Amanda: I sat down for the first time around February 1 of this year and I barely took my ass out of the chair for seven weeks. I was in Melbourne, Australia. I went there specifically to lock myself in an apartment and write a book, although I didn't write any of the book in the apartment, I wrote it in the cafes and the bars of the neighborhood. And I was just a disciplined motherfucker: I woke up every morning, I went to yoga, I cracked my knuckles, I sat down with my laptop, and I wrote 5,000 words a day.

Holly: Wow. So how long did that take every day? How many hours?

Amanda: I probably wrote for about six or seven hours a day...I didn't capitalize, I didn't correct typos, I just slammed it out. And I also didn't write in any particular order. I just wrote whatever I felt like...I had a bunch of note cards that had notes like - *write about being a Bride* [her living statue appearances were as the Eight-Foot Bride], *write about Anthony getting cancer*, *write about Kickstarter sucking*. I just had a list of about a hundred things and every day I would wake up and I would say, what do I feel like writing? I'm going to write about that today. And what was really interesting at the very end, the last week, there was this little pile of things that I hadn't written about. What was in that pile was really telling - what I didn't want to attack and places I didn't want to go. *Write about your abortion* stayed on

the desk for quite a while.

And then when I got to end of that trip, I flew to TED, very poetically, a year after I had given my talk I spent a week at TED and didn't touch the book. I spent a lot of time on the phone with my editor. I had two editors and they were going through all this shit that I had written. Then I started the long, arduous task of rewriting and editing and piecing it together. I hilariously thought that would take about a month; it took four months. Which meant that my summer which was supposed to be collapsing from exhaustion having handed my book in in June, had me handing my book in in August. And my life, which was supposed to get cleaned up and my marriage was supposed to get quality time and repaired, everything just got thrown out.

I just put up a giant sign - *do not fucking disturb* - I have to finish this book if they are really going to put it out in November - and sort of had the gun to my head. And then I handed this thing in at the eleventh fucking hour and it was one of the hardest things I've ever done. Renting an empty apartment in New York with my two editors; literally just waking up and going for a jog and then working for twelve hours piecing this fucker together; and it was a brain marathon of doom.

Holly: I would think that the editing was even harder than writing it.

Amanda: The writing was a dream. I loved my life in Melbourne. I was free, sort of on my own schedule, I was writing sort of according to my mood and it felt hard, but fun. The editing was hard and a total bitch. Not to mention giant life catastrophes of epic levels that I don't want to even discuss coming my way...trying to deal as best I could but just be like, wow, matters of life and death are happening all around me and I am just going to focus on my fucking book. I'm just going to get this done. I don't care what else happens.

Holly: Yes. Because who has time for real life when you're doing something like that, it is such a gigantic project. I don't think a project could be bigger than that. Except maybe writing a Broadway musical or something on that scale.

Amanda: And what is really interesting too is when I look at the entire process from tip to tail, it did take about nine months. And I think there is beautiful poetry in that, which is the book as pregnancy and labor metaphor is pretty apt. I've heard people say it a million times. It's a lot like that and I think a book much more than a record album. Because a book is a solitary process, you're the only one who is pregnant. You're not pregnant with a band. It is you and this thing that you're trying to get out of you. No one else knows what's in there and then it comes out and it belongs to the world.

Holly: I'll be so excited to hear people's reactions to this book because it's really not like any book I've ever read and what it discusses is not like anything that I've ever read about. How important it is to surrender to the "Art of Asking." Your whole story is about this book and the book is about your story.

Amanda: We edited about 70,000 words...Our big pair of cutting scissors was *is it on topic?* Even if it is an amazing story. If it's not about asking, it's hitting the floor. I had some great back and forth with my editors scooping up these little snippets on the floor trying to sneak them back in and failing, but they really did serve me and Neil [Gaiman, her husband] line-edited the book for me, he held my hand and helped me cut thousands of words. And if anyone understands the craftsmanship of what makes a story engaging, it's Neil fucking Gaiman. So I had some heavyweight help in constructing this sculpture. It's not a linear story. It bounces around in time and place - it bent reality in the book and things kind of happened out of order, but they are all just there to serve the theme. And it is there to make people really think about Asking.

Holly: What you write in the book about being *seen*, and seeing other people. That was so resonant - anyone can read this and get something out of it because we all want to be seen. We all need to be seen.

Amanda: Yeah. It's very true. That's been a lifelong lesson. And one of the biggest, ongoing and most powerful lessons that Anthony gave me.

Holly: So you're doing a big book tour. Going to a lot of cool places.

Amanda: I'm doing a book concert tour. I'm basically going around the country doing concerts with the book in my hand.

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Try watching this video on www.youtube.com, or enable JavaScript if it is disabled in your browser.

Last weekend I took a train up the Hudson to Rhinecliff to see Palmer's musical production *The Bed Show* at Bard College's Fisher Center for the Arts. Steven Bogart, her high school drama teacher at Lexington High School, was directing. A group of Bard students - each more gifted than the last - no, scratch that - they were all equally gifted - were the acting ensemble. Palmer had written several songs for it as well as contributing around six of her solo and Dresden Dolls numbers to the production. During our interview, she described it to me as a "passion project I've wanted to do forever." She continued: "it is a fucked up musical: there's all sorts of crazy; it is a beautiful, hot mess that will never ever go to Broadway in a million years musical...It is beyond Off-Broadway. It is Anti-Broadway."

The Fisher Center is a small and intimate theater. Prior to the show, Palmer and the students strolled around the audience with ukuleles and perched on people's chairs singing songs they made up on the spot. The show itself was stunning; simultaneously screamingly funny and steeped in pathos. It poked at your tenderest spots, not just touching them, but staying there, pushing in until you couldn't breathe. The actors were amazing and the building was charged with the energy of creativity. I took two friends with me who had only seen Amanda once before; they were astounded. We met many audience members of all ages, and one young woman had driven eight hours from Cleveland to see it. You see, it's like that. It really is.

Amanda Palmer will be touring the United States during her book tour, appearing in New York City Friday November 13th at the Union Square Barnes and Noble. [Learn more here.](#)

In her words:

"It's a book about...a lot of things. My marriage, my days as a weird street performer, my amazing band and label disaster, my difficulties dealing with a best friend who's had cancer for the past three years; but that's all sort of a veil. Mostly it's an attempt to try to discover why all human beings (especially artists) have such a hard time asking for things. I poured my heart into it. It's a

really personal book. It's also really FUNNY. and sad. It's a weird book. but I'm really, really proud of it."

And she should be.

Lessons on the Art of Asking, From Amanda Palmer's Inspiring TED Talk

Alix Montes

Career Advice | March 20, 2013

I recently watched a TED Talk by Amanda Palmer called "The Art of Asking." Like all TED speakers, Palmer had an interesting story, but for her that's quite the understatement. She opens with a demonstration of how she made money before her music career took off: by standing on a green crate with a flower in one hand and a wedding veil in the other. Palmer would perform on the sidewalk as an eight-foot-tall bride as pedestrians dropped money into a hat. For every donation, she offered a flower.

As her music career took off, she never left the crate and hat behind. After concerts she would ask her audience for different things. Her ability to ask for help or money was enhanced by the internet—so much so that she led one of the biggest crowdfunding music projects to date. It's safe to say that Palmer found success in her career because she literally asked for it. Of course, she worked diligently on her craft, but her ability to ask was the catalyst for her career.

For many of us this makes no sense. I doubt that I'm speaking for myself when I say that we were taught to be self-sufficient and to work hard so that the right people would notice. As we get older, we start to see that this isn't entirely true. The music industry is a clear example of where talent alone doesn't always win. In her TED talk, Palmer breaks down something essential to success, which is the art of asking. Here are a few of my favorite quotes from her talk:

"Is this fair?"

Palmer recalls a question she'd ask herself during her days on the crate: "Is this fair?" While on her crate with a hat at her feet, people would often yell things like, "Get a job!" It took her a while to realize that it's fair to ask for things. My mom once told me that you don't get what you deserve, you get what you ask for. It is the same as saying that "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." One of the best ways to show we deserve more is to ask for more. Even if your boss denies your first request, you've sent a message that says you're ready to take on more challenges. Don't be scared to ask because when you don't, the answer is always "no."

"It's not easy to ask... asking makes you vulnerable."

As we know, asking is hard. Palmer is right when she says it makes us vulnerable. When we ask, we're showing our hand; we're making it harder to hide behind a poker face. When we ask questions, we expose our ignorance and shortcomings. But we shouldn't be scared of these humbling acts. As I said in a previous post, "the biggest acts of humility are often the biggest displays of confidence." Not only does

asking display confidence, it requires it. How much you receive depends on how well you ask. When you muster up the courage to ask, own it. Don't be ashamed.

"...The perfect tools aren't going to help us if we can't face each other and give and receive fearlessly."

Palmer constantly talks about how much she received from her fans: a piano to practice on, a place to sleep at night, a meal for her band. She talks about how and where she asked. However, she doesn't go into much detail as to what she offered in return. It's hard to imagine that a starving artist whose day job consisted of standing on the street with a hat could have something to offer. But Palmer says that through the very act of asking, she connected with people.

In addition to the flower she offered her donors, Palmer gave each donor a moment of eye contact, a sense of acknowledgement. To her fans Palmer gave her music for free. Through her blog she shared her stories with them.

Palmer's next lesson is twofold: When you ask for something, be prepared to offer something of value in return. The other part of this is not to discount what we bring to the table.

"Through the act of asking people, I connected with them. When you connect with them, people want to help you."

After her band signed with a major label, Palmer's first project sold 25,000 copies, a failure by industry standards. In the months that followed this failure, fans slowly started handing her money after her shows to apologize for illegally downloading her music. This soon became a regular occurrence. She decided to take a risk and give her music away for free. Hoping to leverage the connections she made at shows, on Twitter, and through her blog, she decided to raise money for her next album and tour through the crowdfunding site Kickstarter, trusting that her fans would support her.

As a result, Palmer led one of the largest crowdfunded music projects, raising close to \$1.2 million. Palmer's label failed to account for the connections that she forged with her fans. She set a new record for music projects on the site.

The lesson here? We can't afford to underestimate the value of authentic connections. Making connections is how we make friends. In our careers, it's how we get mentors, sponsors, and advocates. However, just like the record labels can't force people to pay for music, we can't force these relationships; they have to be authentic.

“The things I’ve done, the Kickstarter, the street, the doorbell—I don’t see these things as risk, I see them as trust.”

It’s safe to say that Palmer took some pretty bold risks to get to where she is: sleeping in the homes of strangers, walking away from the resources of a major label, asking for support online. But Palmer says she doesn’t see these things as risk, but as trust. Usually people see trust as a risk, not the other way around, but there is a lot of trust that goes into taking risks. To take a risk you have to trust yourself. You have to trust that you’re doing the right things and that they will pay off.

SYNOPSIS

The Art of Asking is about the formation of a supportive community around the artist (and narrator) Amanda Palmer, and the role which asking and giving has played in her professional success.

The book is a memoir, and covers her early professional life, marriage, the extraordinary success of her *Theatre is Evil* kickstarter. It's an apologia for several of her projects which have attracted internet backlashes. As the book concludes, Amanda is forced to choose between supporting her best friend, who has a life threatening illness, and keeping her promises to her fans.

It's an extraordinarily intimate book, about how Amanda's life is changed and sustained by the generosity of others.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Does the book change your interpretation of performance art, street art, or Amanda's music?
- What risks does Amanda take which you never could? Why?
- Which disclosure makes you most uncomfortable? Why?
- Amanda's friends and partner have allowed her to strip away their privacy in this book. Could you allow a loved one to expose you in this way? Why?
- What are you afraid of? What else?
- If you were aware of any of the controversies referenced in the book, did your opinion change?
- If are an artist, how has this made you reconsider your practice?
- Are you part of any form of circular giving? What does it mean to you?

THE ART OF ASKING WHY WE HATE AMANDA PALMER



Image: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

DISCLOSURE: I HAVE a prior professional relationship with Amanda Palmer as an editor for her graphic novel Evelyn, Evelyn.

Amanda Palmer is easy to hate. She's loud. She's demanding — and her rise to increased public visibility has come largely care of her willingness to treat the world as part piggy bank, part personal assistant. She stonewalls in the face of criticism. She's got a large, vocal, and aggressively evangelistic fanbase; she's one of those polarizing public figures it's hard to casually enjoy or dislike.

Palmer has spent the last few years ascendant. Half of the cult-favorite punk-cabaret duo the Dresden Dolls, Palmer recently split with her label and launched a crowdfunded solo career. It should come as no surprise that she's a die-hard Kickstarter evangelist: Her first campaign sought \$100,000 and raised \$1.2 million, and since then, she's been singing the praises of crowdfunding as a new populist paradigm for art, most recently in a widely publicized TED talk called "The Art of Asking."

Criticism of Amanda Palmer flies fierce and fast online. Some of it is related to her shocking ignorance of the class politics and context of her so-called crowdfunding revolution. Critics cringe, too, at her sheer volume; her acting out in public; her unapologetic attention-seeking. And again and again, they call her out for her entitlement — to attention, to a platform, to funding, to favors.

It gets personal quickly: because accessibility and connection with her audience are big parts of Palmer's routine; because her public identity is itself aggressively personal.

This is not a defense of Amanda Palmer as a public figure; of the willful class and context-blindness of her recent TED talk; of her practice of shaking one fist at an exploitative record industry while beckoning musicians to work for "hugs and booze" with the other. This is not a plea to let her off the hook or release her from accountability. But when we criticize Amanda Palmer, I think we need to take a long, hard look at exactly what we're reacting to — and why.

In a media landscape that typically reduces women to paragons or villains with strikingly little middle ground, Palmer is a self-styled anti-hero, from her feuds with the record industry to her Wicked Queen eyebrows. And it's worth noting that the actions for which Palmer is attacked most often and most harshly tend to be the ones that conflict with what public femininity is supposed to look like — behaviors and traits that would often sit differently on the shoulders of a male performer.

After all, women are supposed to be nice. They're supposed to accept what's offered them and do it with a smile, and the backlash when they ask for more is swift and quantifiable. Or, it's acceptable only when they're sufficiently feminine and apologetic about it, as if their achievements can only be measured against a backdrop of personal passivity. It's an insidious catch-22 for women, in which any success directly and aggressively sought is treated as fundamentally unearned. We excoriate a performer for courting attention; but if attention is one of the best measures of her professional success, why shouldn't she be chasing it for all it's worth?

Few critics fail to latch on to Palmer's marriage to literary luminary Neil Gaiman, pointing out that she's married into an audience much larger than the one she commands on her own, with the additional sting of implication that she's earned her share of their joint following at best by canny alliance — or, at worst, on her back. That the same critics forget that Gaiman and Palmer's relationship began as — and continues to include — creative collaboration is only marginally relevant; what's more troubling is how quickly they fall into the pattern of attributing a woman's professional success to the nearest well-connected man.

If we're going to drag Gaiman into this, let it be as an illustration of just how profound a double standard we apply to Palmer. Look at the strength and volume of the vitriol directed at Palmer: how consistently (and, to some extent, justly) she's been raked over the coals for her oversteps, particularly those that involve soliciting free work from artists and performers.

Contrast this with the popular reception of Gaiman's current crowdsourced project, an ad campaign for BlackBerry. The website Bleeding Cool applauds Gaiman's creative use of "teamwork" (mentioning in the same breath that he's likely being paid "the GDP of a small Eastern European nation") and the amazing opportunity he and BlackBerry have provided for the author's legion of fans to produce work in nominal collaboration with their favorite storyteller — for free. Other coverage has likewise focused on the opportunity Gaiman's offering his fans. Issues with ownership of the work those fans create for free surfaced briefly, before dissipating just as quickly.

But can you imagine the response, were Palmer to enter into a similar deal? The accusations of exploitation, attention-grabbing, entitlement? The cries of scandal?

Should Palmer be held accountable for her actual transgressions? Hell, yes. But please, check your double standards at the door.