

CREATIVE JOURNEYS

Paths to Artistic Expression

THE CREATIVE PROCESS offers an adventure unlike any other. It involves listening for the interesting bits along the way; picking up the details that fascinate; inviting the best possibility to come along; letting go of control in the name of the whole; giving light and air to the abundance of result, whatever that might be.

I am a most lucky girl. In travelling the roads of varied interests, I have enjoyed knowing many artists who, like me, bring a disability with them on the trip.

I have met an artist working in Swiss oil crayon, with both vision and developmental disabilities; an enthusiastic weaver, warping her loom with a single arm; a low-flying trapeze artist, performing away from his wheelchair; a poet who signs her work through an interpreter to her hearing audience; a sculptor who expresses his ideas through the maze created by his brain injury.

These artists serve as guides and pathfinders for my own expeditions. They create with many companions, only one of which is their disability. And their stories reveal that they were moved to pursue their art as a primary motivation, not in spite of their disability. Their wisdom and example shine through in all that I try to do.

I love the kitchen and, in fact, live as a food writer and culinary artist. But I also like to weave, tap dance and do needlework. All made somewhat trickier in the complete dark.

My deliciously eccentric aunt Sibyl encouraged me as a young girl, "Never say that you can't because... instead, say you can't until..." Carrying this thought has helped me to find the open door and given me the fearlessness to walk through it.

Recently, I had the notion that if I improved my physical voice, my poetic voice might follow happily behind, richer and more robust. I badgered choir directors and leaders of small singing groups until I found a choral director willing to take on a singer who was both



The author, above, with her weaving project, just one of her many artistic pursuits.

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blind and inexperienced. Sue Coffee was starting a women's chorus in Boulder, Colorado, and called, "Come one, come

all!" So I came.

Even though we were not expected to read music, we were given choral sheets with music and lyrics. Many of the women, indeed, were experienced and read well. The rest of us listened, followed along, got the idea and read the lyrics, making it possible to sing out. I sat patiently in the clueless dark, taping the weekly rehearsal. Racing home to practise and memorize on my own, I was greeted the next week with new music, a different song. Oops. I am sure I forever looked like the bump on the pickle, but knew in my little heart that at least I had learned last week's music.

I trod this trail for months, sometimes wondering if I would ever sing with my women friends. Then came the switch-flip. When all the music had been presented, we started refining and memorizing. Yessirree, boy howdy! This daughter of Texas, bless her heart, already knew it. My patience and unlikely dogged persistence showered me with gold coins of reward. What an unbridled delight.

Sue had given me permission to create, a safe place to do it and the community in which to flourish. She had taken more than 100 women, had shaped the individual threads of our voices, and had woven a tapestry of astonishing sound. She gave women the courage to audition for solos, to gracefully step back when not selected, to graciously step forward when chosen.

Performance was the goal, but not the point. Getting there was most of the joy, but the actual performance gave structure and the final meaning to rehearsal.

My awkward gait during the snappy entrances and exits led us to a decision to place me onstage before the performance, thus I'd be able to slip easily into my front-row riser. This gave me an opportunity to witness the absolute, overwhelming wave of standing applause, whistles and hoots of love from the audience of friends, family and community as my fellow singers came onstage. I was completely unprepared for that feeling.

All the hours of working with tape and memory tricks melted away and gave the space needed for performing. I was ecstatic to have stepped out of my usual solitary writing, typically effected in private, to perform in public for a mass of folk, a mess of friends.

I was selected to take part in a six-voice group solo, aboriginal tones backed by the remaining scores of voices. The standing ovation that followed this experience was a foreign language to me, one I hope I will hear again sometime soon.

So how did I end up in this joyful spot with a spotlight? Asking gazillions of questions in search of my own creative rhythms, I have benefited from many artists.

Here are some of the same questions that you're probably asking:

I've got all this energy. How do I discover my artistic interests?

Listen to the voice that names the things that intrigue you. Notice patterns of interest, such as lifelong favourite books, movies, images and topics. They might suggest an unexpected direction or artistic medium. Find that medium first; you can later sort out any disability-related challenges that you perceive as interrupting the process.

I've got to practise. What will the neighbours say?

Slay the editors, the nay-sayers, the brain worms, all the folks and notions that constantly tell us we can't really do this. It is an ongoing skirmish for all artists, so don't be discouraged. Replace them with a swoop of your hand and a wink. When I daily greet the blank page, I start by pushing aside the vision of a writer in despair, dressed in black, draped over her manual typewriter, ready to hurl her half-empty whiskey glass or half-full ash-tray at the taunting wall, not knowing what to do with the second act. I make room for a full experience and success, as I define it.

Dabble and dribble and burble and putter fearlessly, listening all the while. Find the sweet spot just beneath thought. That is where your art lives. Often, I am struck by the bolt of power and light. More often, I am pelted by the patter of gentle drops. If I grip the project too tightly, it slops right out of hand, refusing to be squeezed. For me, this dumping of idea in its own form is the best, most fun.

All artists suffer stodginess from time to time. They have a repertoire of blockbusters to get them over the temporary



The author also expresses her creativity through cooking; here, at a talent show, she presents a narrative on the culinary arts.

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hump.

For example, if the character just doesn't seem to want to move from her chair and leave the house (but she has to in order to witness the murder), an author might look through the spy glass and focus on her hands. What do they feel like? What have they done in the past? Where did that scar come from? The scar may never appear in the short story, but its history serves as foundation for action. She's up and headed for the door. Showing up to the blank page or canvas will become a joyful event.

Okay, that was fun. Now what do I do with it all?

Shape your artistic expression into its

final form, knowing that it's never really finished. Celebrate your success, first with gentle believers, then with the public. Amazement never ceases when I find an audience for something I thought was just for my own amusement. I find that when I give projects away or perform voluntarily, it sweeps around multi-fold and pays back in unexpected ways.

Converting your audience into a market is not necessarily the goal; however, if you feel lucky and appreciate the abundance of opportunity, recognition will surely follow. And sometimes they pay you money. No kidding. Cash and fame hover close by.

I'm ready. What shall I pack in my rucksack?

Let's enjoy a festive beginning. Think large. Listen and take notes. Live mindfully, and your art will follow. Reflect on your own best path in passing on your creativity. Start some new piles.

Read about the creative process and how to develop your own style: You might start with Julia Cameron's *Vein of Gold* (J.P. Tarcher, 1996).

Find a creative community or partner and design a practice: Your local bookstore bulletin board is an excellent place to post a notice. Or join a Yahoo! e-group that fits your pursuit and personality.

And what about my disability?

Describe the role your disability will play in your creative process. In making a personal inventory of talents, skills, preferences and appetites, give your disability a place with good perspective and proportion. Define the ways in which you will manage the tough parts.

Instead of a hurdle to vault or a sandbar to jump over, your disability will become just another aspect of the delightful process of creating art, expressing your passions.

How shall I celebrate my successes?

Include your art in your daily schedule of life. Attention to the repository for your creative energies will become as necessary as breath, yearning for an outlet.

I will leave you with my favourite aunt's favourite toast: "Here's to succulent days and juicy nights!"

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