



The Golden Road That Led Back Home

When I was in my early thirties, I decided to heed the advice from the spiritual realm and enrolled in an abstract painting class for beginners. This was the first time in my life where I was doing something to please myself and not others. I had a buoyancy and feeling of excitement picking out my paintbrushes, paper, canvas, and paints that were on the supply list before the class began.

I entered the brick building that had prayer flags nailed above the entryway, walked down the long empty corridor toting my bag of supplies, wooden easel, and stopped in front of the only active classroom that evening. The art room was everything I imagined it to be. The room was white, with tall ceilings, and a lot of windows that filled the room with natural light. Everyone around me was settling in, so I found an empty seat, pulled out my supplies from the bag, and placed them on the table next to me.

The teacher cleared her throat and introduced herself to us. Laura told us she was educated at the Art Institute in Chicago, clarifying, in fact, that: "It's not part of those schools you see advertised on television here." She asked a student in the back of the class to dim the lights. Bold and vibrant paintings, her earlier work, flashed one after another in a slide show against a stark white wall in the back of the classroom. "Let's just say," she said, as if to apologize, "when I was a young art student, politics and environmental issues were the core of my passion as it was for many of my peers. It affected my work immensely." After a recent move with her husband out West, her style changed, becoming, simplified to two colors and a few brush strokes. "I still have my same passions, but I've mellowed out quite a bit. I know what I can and cannot do in a

lifetime," she said. She found beauty in observing a broad field of grass changing with the light in a day. Personally, I liked her art better when she was young and wild with expression, an opinion I kept to myself. She was tall, with a slight build, and wore loose shoulder length dark hair, but she looked old for her age. I was surprised when she revealed she was only in her early forties. Our teacher walked around and asked all of us about our painting experiences. Most of the students had taken classes before. The only novices in the class were me and the girl sitting next to me. Our teacher gently smiled at us and said: "You can rest assured that you don't even need to know how to draw in here."

It was a luxury to get away from my ordinary roles as wife and mother. Writing was far more solitary and I realized I desired the company of people more than I realized.

"That's good," I said, as I turned to the girl, "since I can only draw stick figures."

"Me, too," the girl told me.

After I got home, I was hoping to have a late-night conversation with my husband about my new class, but instead I found a huge rose on the kitchen table when I turned on the lights. A note rested next to the vase. It was hidden beneath the branches and miraculously survived the early storm two days before. XOXO

I felt content, thought I shouldn't have. I believed things were coming together, but my world was actually about to change.

This flower from my husband perfectly fit our assignment for next week's class. Laura had instructed us to find something that moved us; a beautiful flower, or an elderly couple holding hands, for example, and try to sketch what we saw as best as we could in our class journal. I hoped I could rise to the challenge because I wanted to impress my teacher.

I immediately sat down at the kitchen table, positioned the rose to find its best angle, and began to write in my journal.

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It was the last rose in our garden, past its prime, yet still in full bloom and beautiful. Yellow rimmed pink petals, slightly curling under but I see beauty as it moves through stages of decay. Shocking transition to see as we move from one season to the next."

I sketched the rose beneath my entry. My pencil was shaky while I was drawing; my strokes tentative. When I finished, I sat back and looked at it. It looked flat and had no depth. I felt it lacked realism. I was disappointed. Maybe I wouldn't feel comfortable showing my drawing to the teacher.

Two days later, in class, students walked to the washroom to fill glass jars with water, others

taped huge pieces of white paper to the wall to smear paint with huge brush strokes. I followed what the old man next to me did by preparing my wooden pallet with a rainbow of colors, which I squirted from small tubes and jars. Then I froze.

I sat there perplexed. Was I supposed to dip my paintbrush in water before I used the oils? Everyone knew what they were doing but I didn't know. I didn't want to ask any questions because I didn't want to spoil the feeling that I'd found something I loved.

Laura came to stand behind me and I swiveled in my chair toward her direction. "This is embarrassing, but I don't know what to do next. I've never painted before and remember; I don't know how to draw."

"Go ahead now. Paint your pretty flower," she said, in a challenging tone. Then she just walked away, leaving me sitting there, still wondering what to do.

My flower sketch of the previous evening didn't remotely resemble the one sitting on our kitchen table the other night. *Who was she kidding?* I felt a little disappointed that it looked as though a sixteen-wheeler semi had squashed it into a pancake.

I dabbed my paintbrush into the paint and smeared it across the page. I looked around me and everyone was getting into the painting zone, and so I tried to, also.

My teacher casually walked around the room, and I felt her pause behind my shoulder. "Hmm," she said as she moved closer next to me, held her chin and walked away from my painting to get a better perspective. "Why are you sitting down? Have you tried standing up?"

"No. You didn't tell me I was supposed to stand up," I told her, smiling uneasily. Then, I felt her hands grab my stool, rolled it from underneath me and to the side. The chair bounced against the walls and spun.

"Just give this position a try and see what happens," she told me. She sashayed across the room and bit into a crisp green apple.

After adjusting my easel, my hands felt the freedom to dip my brush into the paints, any colors, until I forgot I was in a room filled with other students. Somehow I had reached the painter's zone. I watched in amazement the way my paintbrush danced the cha-cha along the white paper, dotting here and there, and striking aggressively against the canvas after mixing colors. It was almost embarrassing to suddenly understand what I was supposed to do after a little guidance. My hands weren't connected to my brain. They knew exactly what to do, but it was my mind that kept telling me I didn't and couldn't possibly know since this was my first painting class.

"What do we have here?" she asked me as she stood beside me and smiled brightly.

I looked at her, unsure of what had just happened. We stood shoulder to shoulder and admired my work. "I don't know, but my flat little flower seemed to come alive once I put my body into the act," I said.

"This looks like an epiphany to me. And, this is your first time painting, right?"

Who was I kidding? I felt completely



ecstatic that something that I tried for the first time was not having miserable results. I had to suppress the urge to jump up and down, or even dance. Afraid of the attention my teacher was shining my way and the way the other students might take it I said, "You're putting me on, right? This stinks compared to what everyone else is doing."

"Don't be concerned about what others are creating."

She jabbed me in the ribs and smiled before she walked off, happily crunching away at her apple, to help someone else across the room.

The teacher had little cards with famous painting on them. She had us select the one that we felt drawn to and take it back to our easels to paint. This lesson helped me draw by teaching me to look at the shapes in the painting. Breaking down the picture to small parts was the intention. I chose "Woman at Her Toilette" by Berthe Morisot, but it was too complicated. So, I followed those same guidelines and drew the picture on the cover of my box of oil pastels. The proportion wasn't there, but I had fun playing with this to produce the back and then front view of women standing together in their gowns in a surreal landscape.

That night, at home, after I put my children to bed, I found myself moving quite quickly through my pad of canvas paper. Feverishly, I moved through each page, pulling the paper from the perforated edges in order to bring another clean page to the front. A theme of

triangles moved through my pictures. Each one was a bit different: expressing my emotions, yet not caring about rules or rigid guidelines.

Two weeks later, I painted my first scene in class. It was surreal and happy looking, which surprised me, as I believed I would be painting with moody black and grey tones because I was writing about my crappy childhood. Instead, a golden road emerged in a forest filled with colorful fall trees. Out in the distance there flowed a river, flanked by a crop of rocks by the shore and an orange and blue sky. The painting was done within twenty minutes. I never questioned the image.

Everyone in my art class stood around me for the critique; hardly anything negative was said. My teacher mouthed "outstanding" to me. I knew right away that this picture would be the one I would be entering into intimately, as this was the landscape of the place where a fictional story, which had been stirring about in my mind, would be set.

After class, my teacher pulled me aside and told me about artist retreat workshops in Ghost Ranch, New Mexico, Oxbow in Saugatuck, Michigan, and San Miguel Allende in Mexico, and I thought to myself, she must really see something in me. This information went beyond her teaching me about a blind contour, or where to purchase a velum oil stick. She told me, "You know who you are... a painter," she told me cheerfully. I looked at her, disbelieving.

"Me?" It felt really good inside to find something that was expressing my feelings and my new passion was validated and supported positively by someone other than my husband and mother. My mother was an artist, too, and I had spent my childhood going with her to painting classes. I felt that I had absorbed her techniques and style. On the other hand, she rarely painted as I got older, because she was so far into her alcoholism. I recently had been learning about the abuse I suffered as a child, and was leery about connecting to her on a positive level. If I accepted my painting talents, would I have to accept the darker aspects of my mother?

During the next class, I was paired with a retired architect in his seventies, who had been painting perfectly precise lines the whole class. He told me he wished he could loosen up his style, but after all the years he was trained to be precise in his field, it was a difficult transition. I didn't know what to say, but he abruptly changed the subject. "I'm not sure if you noticed, but I see a woman in your picture."

"Really? Where?" The old architect signaled for me to walk back to the wall.

"Sometimes I see objects or people in a painting if I look at it from a different angle."

We stood there and surveyed my painting. Below the roots of the tree, I saw a woman, just like the man said. "It looks like the roots are her hair and she's laying down, part of the earth." I thanked him for pointing her out to me.

"Who do you suppose she is?" he asked, looking at me with curiosity.

"My, I don't really know. Maybe she's the Maiden of the Forest," I said, only half kidding. My mind was peppered with ideas all the rest of the class. I couldn't wait to get home and write.

Little did I know how real she would become to me that I would have to express the picture I drew with words in a fictional story. I was secretly proud of what I had written, but a little intimidated as well. The subject matter of abuse was not something I could share with others. It was beautifully written but dark at the same time. This was another aspect of my creativity that I would hide for many years.

It was interesting that my mom painted and yet her drinking interfered so dramatically with her reaching her full potential. But, while she didn't take her own art as seriously as she could have, she always protected me in my creativity. I remember that, when I was in kindergarten, my mother somehow got wind that my teacher was trying to "change the dominance of my hands," by making me draw and write with my right hand instead of my left. This is one of the few times in which my mother actually met a teacher to "bawl them out" about a practice she could not tolerate since she believed this would kill my creativity before it started to bloom. Apparently, she had also passionately defended one of my sibling's choices to make a sky green and the grass blue, when a teacher told her that he couldn't follow directions. It was always a wonder to me the great lengths my mother took to protect her children's creativity by speaking up.

And, then it dawned on me that creativity is freedom to express and in our family it is freedom to express pain.

I told myself I wanted to show Mom my new painting. So, one Sunday morning, I packed up the boys and drove to their place.

When we entered my parent's tiny apartment, my father took the painting from my arms and I told him not to peek at it just yet. While my parents fussed over the children, I looked around the room. My mom had hung her own paintings, as well as the framed small ink drawings her mother--my grandmother--had drawn years ago. My mother sat us all down to eat something and kept getting up to fill everyone's glasses,

ending up eating her food cold. There was no alcohol at the table; she had been sober for fifteen years.

After dinner, we settled into the living room and I pulled out my painting to unveil it. My mother said she was excited to see what I'd done.

For years, my mom had been telling me to paint, reminding me of all the times I went with her to her painting classes. Her psychiatrist had directed her to take painting classes after her divorce, to distract her from her depression. He had asked her when she was the happiest in life and she answered, "Painting in New York." He took her literally, but I figured she could have simply meant before my father entered her life.

My dad took one long look at my painting resting against my mother's painting easel, scratched his chin, and shook his head. "You have the talent of your mother," he said. "What do you call it?"

Without thinking I blurted out, "The Golden Road."

He grabbed his camera and motioned for me to stand next to it, so he could snap a picture.

My mom faced me directly, as we stood next to each other in front of my painting. "This isn't a new picture for you, you do realize, Talis?" she asked. "When you get a chance, look in one of those old scrapbooks of yours at your house." She felt sure I had made a scene like this when I went with her to an art class with her old teacher, Mrs. Dubois. Hearing her teacher's name brought back a vision of an old woman with grey hair neatly rolled into a bun with bobby pins, wrinkly paint-stained hands, and clothes that smelled of turpentine.

"What color did you use to first wipe out the white on the canvas?"

"I think I just mixed white with a little brown."

"Good. Artists call this Sepia. It's a nice neutral to start with. Did your teacher tell you to do this?"

I shook my head no and she said that painting comes naturally to me because I had been exposed to it a lot watching her when I was a child. "Well, it is just beautiful, Talis. I love the colors and strokes that you used." Deep down I knew my mother loved me.

That night, after I put my children to bed and I thought about how my mom and dad remembered what I painted long ago. I went down to the basement again and rummaged through dusty old scrapbooks until I finally found the picture they were talking about. The only difference I could see between the two was the childhood version was in pastels with sailboats in the water because they populated much of our

town's lake in the summertime. They both had the same mysterious golden path. On the bottom of the picture I wrote my first name and age, ten. My parents separated the following year.

The last time I went to class, I was newly aware of the sexual abuse that happened to me when I was a child. I didn't want to go to class, but I forced myself to because my husband knew I loved the class and was surprised when I first said I didn't feel up to going. The memories were on the outside, still seeping into my pores and I wasn't adjusting well to the news. And, of course, this was too new to voice concern with my husband. I brought my artists notebook to class and opened it up when my teacher asked me how I was doing. I pressed my lips together because no words would come out. She looked at the picture I painted of a gold door that had the words Doorway to Pain scrawled above it. I knew she wasn't an art therapist and couldn't expect her to say anything remotely encouraging. "Oh, that happens sometimes" wouldn't seem to help.

Laura told us that night that she was going to work at another university, much further away than I wanted to travel to. Besides, I was embarrassed about what I had revealed to her and couldn't face seeing her again. I tried to replace Laura with a local teacher who I envisioned would be my own Mrs. Dubois, but she turned out to be disappointing. One day, I brought in my Golden Road painting and she told me my sky was "wrong" and that she could give me pointers to "fix it." In her chipper voice, she said: "Your sky could definitely be brighter." So, I introduced more peaches and oranges to block out much of the blue colors and my sky transformed. She stood behind me and said in a pleased voice: "That's better. It's not so somber any more." I tried to view what she had to say as positive criticism.

When I got home and called Mother she was livid. "She told you to do what?" I pulled the phone away from my ear as she went into a tirade about how an instructor should never tell a student to change a painting. "Those colors you chose expressed your emotions at that time. You weren't happy. Maybe you weren't happy."

And, then I felt myself reel inside. "Yea, who the hell is she to tell me to change my painting? Jesus. I don't know if I can ever get it back, Mom."

Mother abruptly said, "That woman should be shot."

I never went back to class. Not long after, she sent me the picture my dad snapped of me next to my first painting with the original sky. At least I have that as a reference, although I find it still too hard to monkey with the colors again.

It was the end of the summer and I planned to take an art class again. I signed up at a local art studio, hoping my children would enjoy the experience with me. I was the newbie in class again. Exactly ten years had passed since I painted The Golden Road, or rather what I refer to now as The Road Not Travelled, since I had spent those years exploring writing rather than painting. My teenage boys had always shown an interest in art and they just didn't get a lot of it in schools. I figured we could spend some time out together.

When we walked into the studio, the teacher instructed us to sit in a circle. We introduced ourselves. I was happy. My kids were probably not as into it as me, but seemed game. The teacher showed us some techniques before she sent us off to work on our own paintings. She instructed us to blend colors, using a dry brush, fleshing out a simple nature scene using perspective. I took off with vibrant colors and the same scene of the trees, wild sky and landscape began coming out again, although the road was missing. I wondered what to make of it. Was I seeing another perspective, beyond the road that led me back home---another vantage point? My mind must still have been working out that scene that I abruptly stopped all those years ago, when my writing life took center stage.

I sat there, contemplating my painting, when I realized everyone else was still busy painting. My teacher came to stand behind me and said: "You did that in what...twenty minutes? You're a fast painter."

My older son came over and stood next to me and said, "That's really good, Mom. You are very expressive."

It felt good to connect to my child in a way that honored my past, in a positive way.

So, rather than be worried that I was painting old territory, I accepted the fact that this surreal place is something that I'm going to be working on in perpetuity. It's quite possible, there's another road that I can't see, and it's much different than the one I was on for so long. The scene was no longer perplexing or disturbing. It was just there and I accepted it.

Since art seemed to be tugging at me, I decided to speak with an art therapist about working out what was in my mind with her. I had brought in the picture I drew as a child and the piece I had painted ten years earlier, and sat them side by side against the stone fireplace. I settled on the couch while she sat on the coffee table, and I explained the history of the road. "A week later, memories of sexual abuse emerged. I could never really paint after that."

She looked at me intently. "You had a lot of talent to draw that at your age. Did you know that? It must make you feel sad that you had all of that inside of you and it stopped during that time."

I couldn't register what she was telling me. So, I uttered the reason why my creativity stopped. "My dad left the following year." I took a big swig from my water bottle and rested it on my thigh.

She stood up and picked up my painting and gazed at my child's version. Her eyebrows went up. After placing the painting back down, near the fireplace she asked: "What do you need from me? How can I help you?"

I adjusted myself on the couch, drawing one leg underneath me, sitting more upright, present, and ready to engage. I had met with another art therapist before and she didn't seem like the right teacher for me because her own art was large and massive. I was looking to do something more intimate, something that would open like a book and allow me to explore mixed media, using words and color. I wanted to express my secrets, yet not fully, most of the reality hidden under opaque colors, and some revealed under translucent tones. Would this woman be able to understand my desire for something I could hold, for something that was more personal?

"I want to honor my inner child and all of those experiences. I couldn't express what happened in the book, because it would be too much, but I feel I still need to release it, but not in an obvious way. Art seems like the perfect medium." I looked at her, feeling relieved at being able to communicate so easily.

"You know, I wrote for many years before the memories surfaced. It was kind of a surreal experience. I received a prayer to write, and then stuff came from what I believe was from my higher self to ground me and then, boom, the memories flooded out."

She looked at me with compassion. "Creativity is tied to the right side of the brain," she said. "Sometimes when trauma happens, the trauma gets locked up in the body and can hijack the creativity. You know, it gets shut down. After a trauma occurs, people often don't have the words to explain what happened to them. But, they have images. So, when you locked away what happened to you, you also shut away your creativity."

We agreed my experience was not typical. "I don't want to stop writing. I'm just the type of person who has to complete something before I bring something else in and I feel it's time now."

We discussed different ways I could express myself. I showed her some books I brought about creative journaling, altered books and my ideas that were formulating. She walked toward a

bookshelf in the back of the room and said: "Here, I have something to show you."

I've been working on my own altered book for eight years now. I work on pages here and there. There's no completion date."

She handed me a thick, heavy book and I placed it on my lap, carefully opening it. I looked up at her feeling excited. "The pages are so thin," I commented.

"It's a Bible." Intrigued, I slowly turned the pages taking in the images of female deities scattered throughout. The word goddess replaced the word, God. "Your images are lovely. Gosh, I would never have thought of using a Bible."

"I'm from the south and was fed a lot of crap about God. My God is both female and male."

"Why not?" I replied. I liked the way she thought. Mindfully thumbing through the pages, I took in written words, sparkly paint, hidden pockets that held tiny letters with what I assumed were secrets. Some pages were wispy thin, while others were thicker since she glued several pages together to hold pieces of fabric, other found objects, or colored stiches to frame certain pages.

I felt overwhelmed that I was understood. "This is beautiful. I want to do something like this, but I'm still not sure if this is *it* exactly."

"Well then, I'm sure it will come out in time."

In my mind, I had already decided to work with her. I hoped it was the right decision.

We met again the following week in her artist studio. I sat beside her on a swivel chair. "Well, let's just get down to it." I opened up my canvas bag and pulled out my writing that I described the week before. "Here is the prayer, and guidance to myself to ground me, I guess. I won't show you the memories."

I watched her read it. I had never shown anyone before. Ropes, my therapist from years ago, never got that far. "This is amazing. It's almost like you were witness to a dialogue that occurred."

I agreed. "And, it dropped down to my consciousness," I said. "The part of me that told me about what happened I imagine is sixteen. You know, sassy and cuts out the bullshit and tells you the way things really were. If you want, I can read to you a little bit."

Deborah nodded.

Inside I am old. I have lived a long time and parts of me are numb with grief and I'm dead. Can you help me feel alive again? I guess it's a start that I can breathe again." My voice began to break, but I continued. *Life isn't good where I'm*

at, but it feels good to tell you." I looked up at her with tears pouring from my eyes and started to read again. *I don't mean to make you feel bad, but I know you need to hear this. I don't want to destroy your life forever. Forgive me for destroying the life you had. I know I make you sad sometimes and that you would like to be free of me. I know you wish this never happened, but it did. I'm sorry.*

I read a little bit more and said, "I didn't expect to get so emotional. It's been a long time since I read this."

"It's amazing you were able to create a narrative that tells the story. The writing is the function of the left-brain and the art part, a function of the right brain can become integrated in the creative process, so memories are processed and not just fragments of memory. Creating your story shows you that you integrated both sides of your brain."

"So, the process I went through makes sense to you?"

"It is hard to know how the psyche and spirit works to heal us, but it can and does if the conditions are right, and creativity I believe is our natural way toward healing and touching into that which is much greater than we are."

I spent the rest of the session exploring different ways to express my memories using bright colored pastels to cover the words, and then covering some patches in black, scratching out lines, allowing certain words to poke through. Once in the creative zone, I realized I could have gone out for another two hours, but eventually it was time for me to go, feeling satisfied that some of my ideas had moved to fruition.

I have since realized that painting is about the creative spirit. It's not dampened, but turns into something filled with pain and longing, something that communicates with other people.

But words and painting don't have to be separate. I am planning a large project that involves creating stories and have visuals attached to them. Sometimes colors express feelings that words cannot, while words sometimes express feelings that paint can't touch. I'm still drawn to those colors—the ochre of the road, the midnight blue of the sky, the fern green of the grass - but it's the way that I process in order to integrate my history with my present self. I'm not worried if the road goes away, or if it's replaced by something else.