

Wings that grow from the dirt

A painter's road trip journal

Hunter S. Thompson famously pointed out:

"Myths and legends die hard in America. We love them for the extra dimension they provide, the illusion of near-infinite possibility to erase the narrow confines of most men's reality. Weird heroes and mould-breaking champions exist as living proof to those who need it that the tyranny of 'the rat race' is not yet final."

"Near-infinite possibility" was a concept I hunted down with feverish persistence (but I would settle for weird hero) in the summer of 2013 when I cut my client load and budget to a minimum, packed up my house into storage for three months of daily painting on the road with my rabbits.

I would paint Food & Wine while living with a chef in San Francisco amongst foodies and wine connoisseurs — and listen to the elite say things about the fig notes in that lazy Malbec and the tenderness of the chicken from the honey butter and buttermilk. I wanted to be analyzed, New Age-ized and catalyzed by psychics in Sedona while learning about the oxygen quotients of their authentic adobe walls. In Santa Fe? I only wanted to sit in awe, drunk and dumbstruck by the color everywhere and humbled by its loquacious skies, painting the wild horses. I wanted my rabbit Dakota, who had a terminal illness, to have his last year amidst new smells and adventures with his females.

Have you ever heard of A-story and B-story in fiction writing? This was my A-story; the public facing story. However, this article is really about the B-story; the grit and real journey behind the public story.

So, let's start again.

It was June and I had been painting every day since January 1. I had outlined 12 months of painting themes with story tension with the dream of the project becoming a 12 chapter book in 2014. I was fortunate in 2013 to have one steady design client the full year. This helped stabilize the project. But the budget was tight and I was still squeezing in my daily paintings and blogging into one hour due to the demands of my day job.

In May, during the Bunnies & Bicycles theme, I lost a friend. It was the fact that I was still able to paint and blog at a time when I just wanted to grieve privately that gave me the confidence for the summer road trip. Ironically, May was the largest project print sales month. Painting when I

didn't want to paint as it turned out was the single most powerful tool for rewiring my brain towards the gift of daily creativity. What did I know about good art or creative practice?

By June, I had given notice on my rental and forfeited it to the family across the street. I figured, hey, it's just a rental and until I own a home, I would be light as a feather and choose adventure over comfort. I didn't know it at the time, but this created an unexpected undertow of disruption that colored the whole summer. It hit me slowly that I was technically free to go and live wherever I wanted to. Sounds fun doesn't it? Honestly, by the end of the summer taking a job as a prison guard sounded better!

The A-story? I was living in a garden apartment in NOHO San Francisco with a chef waking up to the smell of warm pastries upstairs and the Pacific ocean. My calendar filled up with friends, birthday parties painting research, client work and the logistics of getting around in the city. Soon, the B-story gained momentum fast — moving exhaustion, painting on a tiny dimly lit table, 2-3 hours of sleep a night, behind in client work, studio-less disruptions. Nothing sharpens the senses like disorientation. My passion for painting Food & Wine quickly dissolved into a passion for naps.

One of my followers emailed me from Vermont: "Please, I beg of you, paint food with the same love you painted rabbits. Please!"

I kept painting, but it was more sleepwalk painting. I remembered my letter to my followers in January: "Thank you for being here, for helping me show up. I am committed to painting and posting daily. There will be bad paintings. It will be hard to post those. But I promise I will do it. I'm taking the motto: 'Be Happy Not Perfect' all way to December 31, 2013."

I painted more bad food paintings and had lots of fun with friends on no sleep that month. I hated painting, I wanted it to go away. I needed space. But that wasn't part of the bargain. I thought about why art gets the abuse when stress hits? Why do I dismember it and put everything else above it. I knew this was the battle I was in. I was trying to rewrite my conditioning — our conditioning.

Then I got an unsubscribe message from a follower:

"In May, I thought your blog was worth it. But now I realize it's really not. Your paintings are too simple and just not very good. You really need to consider that people are looking at this crap."

I'd like to tell you that I considered the source — a no-name gmail account. That I remembered what Julia Cameron said about blocked creatives and criticism. That I didn't let these words slowly poison me or worse yet that I didn't lock the doors, draw the shades and have a full on gut numbing three-year-old cry — the kind with spit and the whole thing. At least I can tell you, I called a friend who had a brilliant tool box for dismantling my tar and feather shame. I still wanted to go home. Oh yeah ...

All that was left was to go forward. The commitment to myself and the group of people who looked forward to a bit of color in their email box over morning coffee. I continued to get sweet love notes from them, even in this time. I hadn't realized how important presentation, perfection and acceptance was to me until this moment. To think that my little paintings, the one thing I used to reinvent a life of discovery and beauty was just shit at this time was when the real journey began.

Months later, I was doing the dishes in my new kitchen (a rental), the book "The Art of Daily Cultivation: A celebration of 365 paintings" was published and in the hands of customers, and I saw a beautiful butterfly drinking water on the ground. She looked like she was in prayer. She seemed so full of all that life offered from that tiny spot on the ground. I realized the ground gives us nourishment and wings. The water fills ours bodies with flexibility.

Infinite possibilities were born that summer — but on time release and a lean budget of money, energy and faith. I learned that wings grow in the dirt and meet the sky not the other way around.

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Postscript: I posted the nasty unsubscribe letter on FB and said: "I understand that many of you don't do your art because of fear that this type of note could kill you ... I want you to know I'm still alive and well. In fact, better than ever. It's a testimony to the power of creation that our artistic efforts can inspire such wrath. Keep going!"