



“All the arts we practice are apprenticeship. The big art is our life” - M.E. Richards

Who would have guessed that an ‘art focused’ visit to Birmingham would yield so many lessons in life? In early May, I traveled to see a lifelong friend to reconnect and rejuvenate. I thought it would be great fun to put a palate knife of paint to a canvas. My best friend from 2nd grade, Jennifer Harwell, is an artist. She emerged from a tough decade in her 40’s and found healing by teaching herself to paint. At her gallery, she’s now helping others by guiding them towards the same journey of expression and freedom. www.jenniferharwellart.com

Following are my lessons for life learned from putting paint to canvas....

1. Allow the process to unfold: During our first lesson, I started showing my true colors. She barely started the process before I jumped ahead in the first five minutes. Fortunately, Jenni knows me well and gently pointed out that I needed to move through the progression of steps – trusting the process instead of driving everything. Wow. What a stunning metaphor for how I do life! We laughed but I was struck by how powerful my inner critic was in nearly everything I do. Trusting the process and going with the flow is sort of a foreign language to me. But, art – real art from your soul -- has to be coaxed and nurtured out, not driven or pushed or bullied. What if I could actually learn to live like this process of painting? What would be possible if I allowed freedom to be my guide instead of anxiety? What would emerge naturally if I just gave myself permission?

2. Embrace risk and possibility. My second lesson was called “No Ordinary Pear”. This was not a perfectly colored type of pear placed in the center of the canvas. Instead, the goal was to use the concept of “pear” but without constraints. This exercise also used paint that normally would be trashed. Who knew a picture could emerge by retrieving leftover paint on paper plates from a big garbage bag?! I started digging, finding plates with dibs and dabs, laying them out and then just began splashing paint on the canvas with my new best friend, the palate knife. Painting the background with long arc like swooshes; I began to create my interpretation of a pear with whatever colors called to me. No careful lines. No precise sketching. Just move and discover. A pear in mixed reds, inferred by swaths of color and texture, appeared. Eventually it morphed into a beet but it was ok. It was good. Discovery can only happen if there is some element of the unknown. Risk was required. I liked the feeling but noticed that I had to work against my default setting to stay within the unconscious definition of “pear”. I realized I often miss so much by working hard to minimize the unknown instead of embracing what is yet to be known.....

3. Eliminate “mistake” from your vocabulary. In the gallery on day three, I learned about “paint overs”. I had assumed that once you paint a canvas you’re stuck with the final work. The image and colors – good or bad- were there to stay. How wrong I was! A piece I did yesterday in blues and whites became a dark green background the next day with abstract buds and leaves. I just painted over the old painting that didn’t speak to me. Having permission to just “paint over” released my creativity. Reframing the concept and word “mistake” seems key to discovering art that’s inside you, whatever you are doing. Caution and worry stifle your process. Good things struggle to emerge when you’re discouraged from experimentation. It’s really a prison of sorts. What could happen if I reframed “mistake” beyond the easel and canvas and sprinkled permission liberally in my life? Why not embrace a mindset of “paint overs”?!

4. Approach your work and life as a creative art. Art is fun work. Work can be fun art. I’m looking at this reality; how both are true. For the art inside you to emerge and for your work to blossom creatively (and all work has its creative opportunity) I learned today that it can’t be pushed and beaten out of you. I am such a “pusher”. I figure if I do the same thing harder I will make it happen. After about 2 hours my painting just wasn’t working. And it was starting not to be fun. I was straining over choices and I was pushing. My teacher and friend said “you know...painting is pretty intense and tiring: sometimes it’s good to take a break”. So I did. I thumbed through art books. I cleaned up the art area. I watched people walk by. I talked with customers. I was “unproductive”. A funny thing happened about an hour later. I looked at my canvas and saw new possibilities. Off I went adding new colors and ideas to the work in progress. Nurturing ourselves is crucial to make art fun work and work fun art. I know the brain science behind this, but I’m such a product of my culture that I override it too much of the time. The Puritan work ethic is so ground into our culture that we believe we are not “working” unless it is hard to do. All the research says that a thing called Circadian rhythms are in operation in our brains. Intense periods of concentration followed by unrelated activities give the brain the break it needs. Our best creative work can’t be beat out of us. Tending ourselves with more gentleness and care is some of the best work we can do

Ideas for Insight and Action

1 - Allow the process to unfold.

2 - Embrace risk and possibility.

3 - Eliminate “mistake” from your vocabulary.

4 - Approach your work and life as a creative art.

