

About a year ago I attended one of many very compelling Credo talks and when it ended I remember thinking that presenting one was the last thing I could possibly imagine doing. The very next day Sharon Walker approached me with that dreaded invitation. I felt stunned. What do I believe? To what do I give my heart? I've never been so definitive in a refusal in my life. Eventually I came to terms with the idea of writing a Credo and thought the process of writing it might actually have been helpful in sorting out some issues, and that I had, as they say, "missed an opportunity for growth". Well, I have been given another chance and here I am. It is still terrifying. Even writing the introduction blurb earlier this month challenged me and I feel I must apologize if this doesn't quite fit that description for I fear that for some time I haven't really been sure where my heart is these days. So please bear with me as I forge ahead....

Last week some friends and I were talking when one posed this question. "What if we are each allotted a certain amount of happiness at birth and I've used mine up already?" It was a sobering thought and no one really had an answer. I began to wonder the same thing about something else. Creativity. My whole life I had been defined, and driven by my creativity and now it seemed to be missing. What if I'd burned through my life's allotment?

This felt like a distinct and upsetting possibility. Realizing that creativity is at the core of my being and observing how it has manifested itself throughout my life has helped me come to terms with the shifts I have been pondering for some time. I have been looking back at all the creative phases in my life with nostalgia, worrying that my waning interest in those old passions was a sign that I was depressed or perhaps going through a mid-life crisis. As a result of all this introspection now I'm considering these old passions in a new light. Perhaps they each erupted like the churning magma in one's belly. Each sought a fumarole to release built up creative pressure as they all popped up throughout my life in creative frenzies. As a child I avidly built fanciful tree houses and woodland huts. I was constantly drawing and making things. Later I mastered knitting and sewing by tackling designer couture one Vogue sewing pattern step at a time. When my kids were in theatrical productions I thrilled at designing and constructing sets and costumes. I dabbled in pottery until my hands got dry and cracked and my wrists ached. I joined ranks with foodies poring over recipes, hand rolling pasta, growing sourdough cultures from thin air, marinating and stuffing -the more exotic the ingredients and challenging the recipe the better. There were furniture restoration and house renovation phases and the decorative painting stint. Lately I have turned my hand to gardening.

Before now I thought these were just distractions. The backbone of my creative work had been just that- work. In college I had trained to be a children's book illustrator and I had worked really hard at it. It may seem counter- intuitive that one would need a creative outlet from creating art, but I think the pressures of deadlines and art director's restrictions made my free time luscious. I fought for every moment that I could do something creative besides illustrating.

If the pressures of free-lancing had caused most of the later outbursts of exuberant creativity what about when I was young and the art directors weren't cracking their project whips? Looking back I wonder if perhaps it had been an escape from the constraints of my big childhood family. The second of twins in the middle of eight siblings, I found that I didn't have my own voice. My older twin had enough self-discipline and determination for both of us and I felt compelled to keep up with her. With an indefatigable mother and an overworked father we all felt tremendous responsibility to help and learned that individual needs and desires had to be ignored in deference to the common good. We learned to work hard, divide equally and never to complain. There wasn't time or energy to coddle each child so we became self-reliant. My mother encouraged me to make art but she tried to limit the hours I spent holed up with my crayons and

Elmer's glue believing every child needed fresh air. When my twin sister and I talk about our childhood now she says she thinks I was lucky to have had the art thing. It made me different. While most of my siblings felt pressured to go into the medical field, it was always a given that I would be an artist.

This prediction came true. I ended up marrying a fellow illustrator and we raised two creative sons together. We had a rich fulfilling artsy life together until the financial uncertainty and pressures of a double free-lance union were too much to bear and we parted ways. Several years later while singing in the UU Church choir in MA I connected with my next love, Roger, and followed him to NC.

Most of you remember my late husband Roger. Several years ago when his cancer went on a rampage, I realized that the pressure of deadlines was a tipping point in the balance of our daily life. Accompanying Roger to all his medical appointments and procedures made carving out time in my studio impossible. So I started refusing work. Eventually I started saying that I had retired. But in reality taking care of Roger had replaced illustrating and become my full time job.

Two years ago this December Roger passed away and I lost my new job. So how much of my lack of get up and go was grief and how much was the retirement blues? Or was that old reliable creativity just gone? I wondered if dusting off the drawing board might be an antidote to my malaise. When an opportunity to illustrate a children's book arose this spring I hesitantly accepted more as an experiment to see if I could stir up those juices than anything else. I threw myself into the research and frenetic sketching but when the time came to do the finished illustrations it was like pulling teeth. I acted like a kid clinging to the doorjamb at the dentist's office. It fed my need to feel productive but it was torture.

And so here I am. I have spent the last forty years illustrating, having accepted whatever work I could to help support my own family: literally thousands of educational drawings, hundreds and hundreds of cooking and craft technique step pictures, dozens of children's books. I had thought I would illustrate until I died. After all, how much energy does it take to sit and draw? But the joy of illustrating is waning and because of this I know that the quality of my work is suffering. All those other creative outlets should be calling me more loudly and yet without the constraints on my time from the art deadlines the thrill of stolen time is missing. One would think the solution was obvious. Get busy doing something so you have limited free time and regain the thrill of a snow day reprieve. Just floating goes against the grain and my inner voice is screaming to get working, to do my share.

The last motorcycle rally that Roger and I attended took us to New Mexico where we stopped to visit an old college friend of mine in Santa Fe. I hadn't seen her in decades and I certainly would not have recognized her. A routine annual physical over twenty years earlier had ended with a diagnosis of advanced leukemia. The doctor said that she had six weeks to live but instead of giving up she and her husband bought a derelict adobe house with no roof and trees growing within the foundation. She says that the work restoring the house kept her alive. By the time I saw her the treatment for her leukemia had caused breast cancer which had necessitated a double mastectomy. She had opted against re-constructive surgery so she had the tiny slim body of a ten year old. Her lungs had been damaged by radiation treatments so she walked around and even went horse back riding tethered to an oxygen tank. Her will to live was inspirational. An accomplished painter she could no longer use the toxic chemicals involved in her art and so she worked daily creating powerful multi-layered collages on her iPad. When I told her I had cut back on my illustration work she sat me down and chastised me. "You have a god-given gift. You owe it to the world to create. No matter if it's just coloring Easter eggs, make

something beautiful every day.” Perhaps this is when I began to understand the scope of creativity and that it was a part of my being.

Composing this Credo talk has been grueling. I have had to dig deep and really think about my past and my path through life. Not one to sit still and think, this has been a novel experience. I will be the first to admit that I am assignment and deadline driven. I am grateful for the impetus for this exercise has taught me a lot about myself. It has helped me come to terms with this state of flux I feel so uncomfortable inhabiting. Now I understand that I have not burned through my allotment of creativity but that it is part of everything I do. It is an approach to life in all its facets. It is in the way I search my closet every day looking for inspiration in the intricacies of a scarf, the shimmering cross weave of a silk blouse, the drape of a soft collar, the cut of a coat, the frivolity of a hat. It is there when I dig a hole to plant a shrub, considering the size, the contrast of color and the texture and shape of its foliage. I am always designing, always looking, always analyzing how colors affect one another, how shapes interact, how tastes balance each other. When my college roommate visited my home here for the first time she commented, “Your home is so lovely. Every inch is well considered”. I guess it is what I do. My artistic output may be minimal right now but I will be ready when my next creative Krakatoa erupts. I think it takes times of dormancy for that to be truly spectacular.