

Brick by Brick

I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I intended to be.

~Douglas Adams

I'm a bona fide late bloomer. It took thirty-eight years and a nervous breakdown for me to find my purpose.

For most people, being hospitalized with a nervous breakdown might be an extreme way to figure out the Meaning of Life, but we creative types tend to write in the margins and paint outside the lines. What I tell my kids about my Mom Interrupted period is: "It was the worst time of my life but it was the best thing that ever happened to me."

How, you might ask, could you think that being placed in the lockup ward of a psychiatric institution after overdosing on prescription anxiety medication be the best thing that ever happened to you? Isn't that supposed to be the phrase reserved for more positive experiences like meeting the love of your life, becoming a parent, or winning the Nobel Prize for Literature?

All of those things are certainly among the best things that have ever happened to me (well, except for winning the Nobel Prize for Literature, because I haven't done that... yet) and I am grateful for them every day. But the nadir I experienced at the age of thirty-eight turned out to be the experience from whence so many other blessings have flowed.

Why? Because all of the carefully constructed walls I'd built around myself collapsed overnight, and I was left as exposed and vulnerable as a turtle without a shell. There was nowhere to left to hide, no room for Denial to make itself at home. It was just my unprotected turtle self in a place that I never want to be again as long as I live.

When you're used to putting up a brave front, to being the girl who copes and achieves and gets things done no matter what (even if "coping" involves depression, bulimia and other self-destructive behaviors) it's hard to admit to anyone that you need help -- even yourself. Even in the hospital, I was desperately attempting to don the coping mask so I could get out. I was a mother and I wasn't doing my job being locked up in a hospital. Fortunately, although I didn't see it that way at the time, a doctor saw through it and kept me there.

Thus I was forced to confront the black hole I felt inside -- to recognize that I was so intent on living my life to please everyone else that I didn't remember who I was. To identify the emotions I'd worked so hard and used so many desperate measures *not* to feel.

Journaling was part of the program. Writing down my thoughts and feelings was the key to more than the therapeutic progress. It opened the door to a distant memory -- that once, I wanted to be a writer. I had been told that it was impractical, that I'd "never make a living as an English major," that I should major in something with a better chance of providing a lucrative job. I had ended up with an MBA in finance and fitted my round self into a square hole -- good at my job, thanks to being an overachiever, but always feeling like a fraud.

I didn't believe in myself enough to fight for what I believed was right back then.

Yet where had being a “good girl” and meeting everyone else’s expectations gotten me? Locked up in a psych ward, that’s where.

Shortly afterwards, in an intensive outpatient program, I was in a mixed age group. For one therapeutic exercise, I had to draw a timeline of my life on a chalkboard, and explain the major events (good, bad and traumatic) to the group. It seemed to take forever because there were many events. I was worrying that the rest of the group was going to get bored before I finished. But then, even before I got to the present, one of the younger group members spoke up. “Wow,” she said. “You’ve really been through a lot. You’re so strong. I wouldn’t have survived half the stuff you’ve been through.”

I started to make the usual self-deprecating remark, but then I looked up at the timeline and I realized for the first time that I *had* been through a lot. Crazy as it sounds, until she pointed it out, I’d been so busy coping and more, striving to achieve and excel, that I’d never once stopped to acknowledge all the hurdles I’d overcome to get where I was. Okay, where I was at that point was in a psychiatric hospital, but I was still alive, and at that moment I started the process of changing my internal cue cards, replacing weak with strong, defective with creative.

Slowly, painfully, brick by brick, I had to put myself back together. In the process I examined each brick and tested it. Was it healthy for me? Was it a material I’d chosen for my own wall or did it really belong to someone else?

Doing that created a stronger foundation for the woman I am today. It gave me the courage to pursue my teenage dream of being a writer, and doing the timeline made me realize that I have a wealth of stories to tell. As I often joke, “God gave me a gift, the ability to express myself in writing. Then he gave me a lot of material.”

Every time I receive a letter from a reader whose life has been touched by one of my books, I’m grateful that I was able to find purpose during the most painful time of my life.

~Sarah Darer Littman