

Flying Island

Writers from the Indiana Writers Center and the state of Indiana

Tuesday, February 9, 2016

From Under the Rubble

Editor's note: This month's nonfiction offers a bit of inspiration and "how-to" from a long-time student at the Indiana Writers Center. It is not intended as a plug for the Center, but rather as testament to the fact that success in writing, as in anything, is only achieved through hard work and persistence once the decision is made to go for it. Enjoy!

From Under the Rubble By Enid Cokinos

“'X' never, ever marks the spot.” —Indiana Jones

Nearly two decades ago, I found myself in the East-West Bookstore in Mountain View, California. It wasn't the New Age shop's healing crystals, Buddha statues, fragrant incense, and CDs by chanting monks that called to me, but a single book: *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron. The red and gold cover, with a drawing of a snow-capped mountain and a flock of Pterodactyls, begged me to pull it off its perch, promising to open my life to new experiences if I would only give it a chance. I marched to the register. I was ready to begin the search for my hidden artist.

Two innovative late-19th-century archeologists, Augustus Pitt-Rivers and Sir William Flinders Petrie, developed a written methodology that significantly influenced the way to conduct a proper dig. I was not lucky enough to have instructions on how to conduct my own expedition, but unearthing that paperback gem was the start of my journey; a personal archeological exploration in search of the aspiring writer, a truer version of myself, buried under the rubble of my life.

Before I knew it, 16 years—a mere blip in geologic time—had flown by. Two major relocations—California to New Hampshire and New Hampshire to Indiana—derailed me. The lure of big paychecks and a business career kept me working long hours with crushing deadlines. My daily journal, when I had time and energy to write, was filled with anger and frustration. Aspirations of writing still reverberated deep inside, but I had no defined path or goal. Sadly, I was no closer to realizing my dream than the day I purchased *The Artist's Way*.

Einstein promised that doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result was insanity. That summed up my actions nicely.

I stepped back to work short-term temp jobs in 2013; not an easy decision, but a necessary one. I needed to decompress and reconsider what I wanted out of life. My husband referred to this transition as my “bridge year.”

Everyone has his or her own litmus test for failure. My sense of failure hit me square in the face while temping at a local company as I began my bridge year. For some reason, a woman I had once worked for—a strong, intelligent woman who knew what she wanted out of life—came to mind. An Internet search revealed she had become an ambassador to a lush, tropical country. I heard a dull thud as my ego hit the floor. I emailed my husband: *Am I a loser?* He replied immediately: No! Why are you thinking this? Do you need to talk? That evening, he kindly expressed that I was in a slump and should not compare myself to others. Easier said than done.

Life did not unfold for me as it did for my friends. I watched from the sidelines as they were accepted by various universities, their parents guiding them through those choices. I wanted that

too, more than anything, but it was up to me to make it happen. Determined to earn my bachelor's degree, I ultimately achieved this milestone at the age of 32, attending classes at night and on the weekends while working full-time. But even with my fair share of career accomplishments, here I was, over the 50-year mark, sitting at a receptionist desk while a former boss sat in an ambassador's office. I felt every inch a failure.

The final Universal nudge came later that year. I awoke from a nightmare within a nightmare, jolting upright to see a figure cloaked in a dark hooded robe looming over me—my own ghost of Christmas Future coming to call. The figure raised its arm and pointed straight ahead. Asleep, I was confused. What did it want from me? Later awakened, I was terrified. Was I running out of time? I pondered, considered, and mulled things over for three more months, and the question that kept coming to mind was: If not now, when? I concluded it was time to continue the journey I had started so long ago.

Once again, my inner determination propelled me forward. Inspired by Messrs. Pitt-Rivers and Flinders Petrie, I created my own instructions for pursuing my dream.

1. Write down your objective

This is a prerequisite for accomplishing anything according to every self-help guru in the world.

I put pen to paper: *Write and submit a series of pieces for publication.* All well and good, but how would I make that happen?

2. List tasks to achieve your objective

Sign up for a writing class. A concrete, attainable task—equally important to the gurus. After years of attempting creative writing on my own, I needed a classroom environment to encourage levels of writing I might not achieve on my own, and to gather inspiration from others with similar hopes and fears.

2a. Actually complete the tasks

An online search brought up the local writers center. Like an explorer unearthing a priceless relic, I felt I had hit pay dirt and immediately registered for the creative nonfiction class. After fumbling around for years feeling lost, this small first step was like a bright light at the end of a lonely, dark tunnel.

3. Develop a circle of support

Little did I know when I began the creative nonfiction class that I would meet my current writing group—a circle of support that allows our stories to come forth without fear of ridicule. I am also blessed with a supportive husband who encourages me to continue even when I feel like giving up.

4. Dig, dig, dig!

There are many ways to get the creative neurons firing, but I recommend maintaining a daily journal. This can be anything from a leather-bound diary to an inexpensive spiral notebook. Try to write each day or, at least, most days, even if it is only for 10 minutes. Some days your thoughts will flow effortlessly onto the page. Other days you might only write, “*I have nothing to say,*” 100 times. The important thing is to show up. Also, carry a small notepad or keep one in

your car. You never know when you'll see something interesting or hear a snippet of conversation for later use.

5. Go on playful adventures

Most of us lost the desire to indulge in child's play after turning 13. Becoming a teenager made it uncool. Then adulthood (gulp), work, and family responsibilities took over. Artists need to be open to new experiences and ideas. Browse through aisles of craft paper or model airplanes at a hobby store, or spend an hour taking photographs at a park. Just have fun. It's liberating and you may be surprised at what bubbles to the surface.

6. Lose your fear of being wrong

At some point during our formative years, an adult told us that the picture we drew was ugly, or the poem we wrote didn't rhyme properly, or we were singing off-key. These criticisms are what keep us from pursuing our dream of painting, writing, or performing. To quote Joseph Chilton Pearce, an American author on human development, "To live a creative life, we must lose our fear of being wrong."

7. Embrace your gift

We are all blessed with special talents and it is our duty to bring forth those artistic gifts. Imagine what the world would be like if Picasso, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, or Beethoven let a disparaging remark stop them from creating their great works. Ignore the naysayers and keep reminding yourself, "I can do this!"

Writing is a lonely endeavor that takes patience, practice, and thick skin. It is painful and dispiriting spending hour upon hour pouring your heart and soul into a story, then spending many more hours editing and rewriting, only to be rejected. This is enough to make many would-be writers turn tail and run. It takes dedication and discipline to come back to a blank page after being spurned. In fact, I am sure that subconsciously, fear of rejection was part of the reason I didn't pursue my dream years ago, but no more. I will not be deterred.

“Take a small step in the direction of a dream and watch the synchronous doors flying open.” –
Julia Cameron

If I had not felt like a failure that day at work, or had the horrible nightmare, I might not have moved on. The desire was there all along but I needed to embrace the reality that time would continue passing whether I pursued my dream or not.

By developing a plan, I was finally able to move forward. Registering for that writing class in late 2013—a small step in the direction of my dream—was the start of something amazing. The synchronous doors are opening. My work is appearing in print and my first short play was produced in 2015. Insecurities often surface, but that too is part of being a writer.

And so, like an archeologist using a mason's trowel, whisk broom, and dustpan, I will continue to use my pen, paper, and keyboard to unearth my true self from under the rubble.

Enid Cokinos was born and raised in southwest Michigan, but considers the Indianapolis area home. She currently resides in Carmel, Indiana with her husband, Todd. Enid's debut play, *Sweet Virginia*, was part of the first-annual IndyFringe/IWC Short Play Festival in 2015. Her work appears in Story Circle Network's 2014 and 2015 Anthologies. She can be reached at enidcokinos@indy.rr.com.

Posted by J. Thibodeaux at 11:39 AM

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