

*When the soul is exhausted,
no beautiful flowers can grow from it.
— Mira Kirshenbaum*

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Learning to Play

Creativity saved my life.

I called on my grandmothers' souls, an Irish saint, and my inner artist to save me. They showed me the way. I didn't know I was saving my life at the time.

The Irish say that when a soul is lost, you can call on Saint Brigid who will ask the fairies to help lay out a thread for the soul to follow back home. She is the Lady of Smithcraft, Healing, and Poetry who weaves together the mental, emotional, and psychic threads that make life worthwhile. She integrates mind, heart, and soul.

When my mother and grandmother taught me to sew at eight-years-old, it may have been because my legs had grown long enough to reach the electric sewing-machine pedal on the floor and my fingers had grown long enough to guide the fabric under the needle with my right hand, while pulling gently from the back with my left. My thoughts were old enough to envision a finished skirt from flat pieces of gingham, a zipper, and thread. My first skirt I made from a white sheet, because that was for practice. I wore it to school, proud as could be.

The Christmas I was nine, my grandmother surprised my sister and me with two dolls surrounded by a full wardrobe of finery, with matching wool girl-size coats. My doll was blond and we had green coats. Jenéne's doll was brunette and their coats were red. We imagined ourselves in one of our favorite fairy tales about the two sisters, Snow White and Rose Red (not *that* Snow White). Our grandmother made magic with her Singer.

For Easter, school dances, and proms, my mom and I made dresses. I picked out the fabric and pattern, and learned that to match the fabric you should use thread one shade darker. We put a leaf in the dining room table to have room to fold and smooth the yards of periwinkle satin, without caring whether the pins scratched the surface. She taught me to pin tissue-paper patterns in a layout more efficient than the instructions so as to have

extra fabric leftover. We cut with my mom's left-handed pinking shears so the fabric wouldn't fray. All this on the mahogany dining room table with brass feet that had been my grandmother's and now is mine. When we were done, the Kirby wound a multi-colored record of our project.

When I was in my last year of college, for my birthday, my mom gave me a Singer of my very own. I made skirts to wear to my first real job as a technical writer. I almost made my wedding dress, but then didn't. When I was pregnant with Wil, I sewed blue striped curtains and re-upholstered the gliding rocking chair to match, as well as made crib bumpers and a soft cotton quilt. When he was little, we sewed clothes for his bunnies and Rugrats. Wil watched when I wrestled white organza and taffeta into two flower girl dresses, and he danced with those dresses in his mini tuxedo at Aunt Amie's wedding.

When I was facing the uncertain outcome of Scott's second surgery, I bought myself a new Elna and sewed curtains of my own design that I see now as the tree of life appliquéd. The diversion and designing of those tree curtains kept me sane throughout those months, as if I was reinforcing my soul with straight pins and zig-zag.

When my grandmother was too old to sit at her sewing machine, too arthritic to sew anymore, she gave me her boxes and boxes and boxes of silk, wool, polyester, polished cotton, organza, and ribbons, seam-binding tape, and an assortment of thimbles, one silver with turquoise beads, one hand sewn of leather for Granddad's thumb for when he patched his truck upholstery, and scissors all sizes, and arcane but essential gadgets, and seam rippers, and plastic shoeboxes of thread. Silk button thread on short wooden spools. Cotton/polyester thread on white plastic spools. Every color you needed to stitch any fabric you desired.

My grandmother was a fabric junkie. So am I. She gave me the ancient weaver's gene, but we called it loving to sew.

That was my dad's mom, who because her first grandson was born from her first daughter, she became known to the rest of us grandkids as MomMom. Her friends called her Gretchen.

My mom's mom, Gramma Liz, was the oldest daughter of the oldest son who came from Ireland to work in the coal mines so his next youngest brother could keep the family farm in Roscommon. She gave me the saints and the fairies, a teapot for tea parties, and her recipe for apple cake that is best with Granny Smith apples and walnuts. She always said, "Go outside and play."

I used to know what I loved, and then I forgot. There was a time, despite our forward-backward steps toward Healing, that the only way to describe it was dark. Dark times. Dark like mid-winter. Dark like mid-forest. Dark like thunderstorms with enough rain to rain forty days and forty nights. Dark, dark, dark, dark.

One particular night, after a cranky dark dinner, Wil asked me a question instead of saying his prayers, "What is your greatest fear?"

"Losing you."

"Mine is having an unhappy family."

"Oh, that's a good one."

My son is the most empathetic, enlightened old-soul that I know. Seasoned traveler that he is, Wil can mimic, with perfect inflection, the flight attendant's speech saying in case of emergency, put on your own oxygen mask first and then help the occupant in the seat next to you. He didn't say it right out, but that's what he meant. I was his flight attendant and he relied on me for safety. Wil also relied on me to be light-hearted enough to play and connect my inner child to his only-child self. You can't play shadow puppets without a bright light.

My dad always said, "You'll ruin your eyes if you try to read-write-draw-sew in the dark." He was right.

In addition to visits from friends for afternoon tea, we did have moments of light, like candles on cakes, like dappled light through the leaves, like late-day sun that gives you a rainbow, but just for a moment, and then the sunsets. But it wasn't enough. The rest of the time felt lifeless and flat. Like all the crayons had melted and the only ones left were burnt orange and raw umber.

One January after our birthday (we're Irish twins, one year apart), my sister delivered a message to me, as if Gramma had sent it herself (but she died the October before). In Jenéne's dream, among other things, Gramma told her, "I'm sad about Shelly. She's not living her life."

When Jenéne told me, I burst into tears. "It must be true if it makes me cry." I was laughing, but gasping at the same time. I sat with those words for days, wondering what does it mean to Live Your Life, *living* your life, really living *your* life? Having something to love? To laugh about? To look forward to?

At a bookstore one day, and this happens a lot, I noticed a book wanting to jump off the shelf. (There's a reason for eye-catching book spine design.) The book was *The Gift of a Year* by Mira Kirshenbaum. So I bought it. You

might like it. It gave me permission and roadmap to carve time out of my days full of normal commitments to make time for something I'd love. Don't think of this gift to yourself as a disposable treat. To identify and pursue your heart's desire is the path to saving your life. The question to answer is "what is my heart's desire?" and her book helps us find answers.

My mom knew I was struggling to find light in the dark, so she suggested another book that once worked for her as a flashlight, then spotlight, then sunlight, *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron. The book has two subtitles that say, "A course in discovering and recovering your creative self" and "A spiritual path to creativity." You might like that one, too. It gave me permission to take my inner artist on a date once a week to find inspiration or color or something surprising, and asked me to fast-write three pages in my journal every morning to capture my dreams. With it, I accomplished a lot more than that.

As I worked through Mira Kirshenbaum's and Julia Cameron's chapters of suggestions and insights and side quotes, I noticed my inner artist starting to chatter. And then she wouldn't shut up. She woke up my inner everyone-else's and I realized they'd all been asleep, or banished. In fact, I remembered, once on a very dark day, telling my inner Pollyanna to shut the fuck up. Ever since, she'd barely attempted to breathe. I finally said sorry and welcomed her back. Thank goodness! It wasn't until I started to wake up myself that I realized how much I had stymied and stifled my inner resources.

My inner executive, it seemed, was the only one who I had allowed in my new house up until then. I was relying too heavily on her for my business, inflating our combined sense of urgency, intensity, and responsibility. I told my inner executive it was okay for her to take a vacation. I appreciated all she had done to help me keep my head above water, now I was okay on my own. Work would be waiting when she got back, but I thought maybe she needed a well-earned trip to Tahiti. I think she had Nike treads on her butt when I kicked her out the front door. *Whew! Got rid of that party pooper*, my inner artist yelled to my inner seamstress, brushing her hands like they'd been covered with dust. *Now let's have some fun!*

My inner artist could not contain her enthusiasm. She insisted we get out the crayons and paper and fabric and thread, promising we had fun projects to start. She insisted we pull the blinds on the windows all the way open, and the sun couldn't wait to get in. She even made me turn off the computer during playtime. Can you imagine the way she was hopping from foot to

foot in excitement, rubbing her palms together? She turned the music up loud and insisted we dance. Then she insisted on shopping.

My inner hippie flower-child insisted on a new wardrobe of play clothes. She said I was done wearing black and helped me find (on a sales rack at REI) a pink batik t-shirt with long, slightly flared sleeves. She said pink is a good color for you/me. She also pointed out pink Shasta daisies, and mini white daisies with yellow centers, and other multi-color daisy things that we bought at Mount Garfield Nursery and planted outside the window of my office, I mean, studio. Then, she told me to start looking around for a used VW New Beetle in lime green and to ditch the boring soccer-mom minivan. We ordered a greatest hits CD by Simon and Garfunkel so we could look for fun and feel groovy.

My inner preschooler insisted on color, so not only did we buy a new box of 64 crayons, but two gallons of paint. I had tried living with professional, grown-up beige walls in my office, only to realize I was surrounded by mushroom soup that matched the PC's plastic case. I wonder how I ever designed good websites with those walls looking on. So in one fast afternoon I painted two walls Ocean Dream blue, two walls Muscat Green (thanks, Sherwin Williams and Martha Stewart). My inner perfectionist tried to get me to touch up the splotches at the ceiling, but I told her not to worry, I was cultivating imperfection instead. I asked her to please leave the room.

My inner artist, in cahoots with the others, insisted on something to form with our hands, and so we became intimate with the inventory of Hobby Lobby, Joanne Fabrics, and Michaels. I saw a smorgasbord of raw materials and I was starving. So I fed myself, just a bit at first, then I went back for seconds. I combined my new treasures with those from my grandmother's boxes, her creative source, and the methods she taught me. I found new ways of my own.

Some people have Starbucks. Creativity is my caffeine, a grande mocha full-caf plus double shot of espresso. Creativity caused me to lie awake on my pillow brainstorming what else I could do with that fabric, those beads, and that ribbon. *So be it*, I thought. *Let me be addicted*.

"You're having way too much fun," Scott would say as he passed by the dining room where I was bent over my sewing machine, using its 20-watt light bulb to help me cut leftover threads from a seam.

"Nuh-uh. I'm having *exactly* the right amount of fun."

Scott didn't really mind because he liked what he saw, me coming to life. I rationalized and affirmed the dollars I spent as worth every penny because

what I bought was art therapy, which it was. As L'Oreal says about hair color, it's okay to splurge, because I'm worth it.

I could tell you exactly what I bought, what I made, but that isn't the point. The point is the process: to begin to create and then to beget even more creativity, like spontaneous combustion. Like Eureka! I learned that the point was to get out of my head and into my heart, which I find especially ironic considering it was Scott's brain in his head that caused me to need the strength in my heart.

Creativity was my lifeboat. It not only kept me afloat, but it gave me the buoyancy to lift my arms and my face to the surface, frog kicking, breast stroking my way to the shore. Creativity was swinging from a rope like Tarzan's transformed Jane, letting go, falling, feet first in a pond, squealing and yelling just to be loud, not caring how stupid you look soaking wet in a swimsuit. Skinny dip, if you dare.

As my creativity swelled from a ripple into a wave, I wanted to body surf, hoot and holler, and dive back in the ocean for more. Creativity let me float between waves and talk with the whales and hear them talk back. For the first time in a long time, I was feeling carefree.

Other women taught me to find a thread for my soul so I could follow it home. Your solution would look different than mine, so here's how to find your own thread, your own answers. What are your forbidden joys? What did you love to do as a child, or before cancer caregiving made you feel seriously old? What hobbies have you locked in a closet, buried under boxes of tax forms and medical records, clothes that don't fit, magazines you never make time to read? If you could take any class now, perhaps one an unenlightened school counselor discouraged you from pursuing, what would it be? If you had a gift certificate to the store of your dreams, in whatever dollar amount you deemed perfect, what would you buy for yourself? What makes your heart sing? What turns on your lights?

I found that while most of the darkness had lifted, the darkness always came back (as it does once a day, as intended). Instead of darkness falling with nightmares, however, my nights were lit with a full moon or star shine or porch lights or bonfires of pruned apple wood at the orchard. At that point in my healing, in my creative recovery, I didn't know if I'd ever write My Book, whether I'd ever get started. And that was okay. I was learning to breathe again. I needed more time to play. But I *was* on my way.

I held a conversation with God one night that went, "Thank you, God, for making me creative."

"Oh no, thank *you*, Shelly, for being creative."

"Oh, no-no-no, thank *you*," I said, but God had the last word.

"We make a good team."

Thanks for reading this excerpt from this 2012 book. Learn more & get buy-links at www.CreativeCouragePress.com.

Damocles' Wife

the inside story of
cancer caregiving
& *long-term survival*
in the midst of
motherhood,
marriage &
making life matter

by Shelly L. Francis

Foreword by Clarissa Pinkola Estés, Ph.D.

