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# STUDIO STORIES

*Illuminating Our Lives Through Art*



LAUREN RADER

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Shanti Arts Publishing

Brunswick Maine

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## FISH JUMPING

Every day I walk the river. The C&O Canal runs on one side and the flowing Potomac on the other. I walk between them on the dirt towpath that stretches for miles, the trees and vines my compadres. It's heavenly, a welcome refuge from the busy, crowded life around Washington, D.C. It's natural and peaceful. In the warm weather the turtles stretch out and sun themselves on logs. My dog Wiley and I often see herons, kingfishers, hawks, the vividly patterned wood ducks. Snakes. Occasionally we've seen beavers, and on one glorious day, a red fox in the glittering white snow.

One day as we walked, I heard a splash. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a fish jump out of the canal. As I stopped to look, she jumped again, and then again. By the third leap I could make out her head, fins, tail — her whole body. I had forgotten there even were fish in these waters.

That's what I think it's like for many of us. We travel through hectic days gliding on the surface of our lives, unaware of the vast treasures quietly waiting below.

I believe that by using our innate natural instincts we can reach beneath the surface, below that everyday veneer, and access the fertile world of our creativity.

Art is a portal. Through it we can explore these mysterious

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depths, see the beauty of our world more clearly, understand ourselves and others more deeply, and realize the gift of our individuality. Like walks along the river, making art is a journey of illumination and possibility, pregnant with potential for ourselves, those we touch, and ultimately, beyond.

*A fog is on the river. Everything looks a little unreal as I gaze into the nothingness. The path is strewn with iridescent yellow, red, and green leaves. I walk amongst them like a queen. The smell — pure autumn. In a few days the leaves will be tattered and brown. On our return the mist has disappeared. The red and yellow trees across the river are now crystal clear. Later the warm morning light will dim as the afternoon clouds cover my clear blue sky. In just a month or so, the bare trees will be white with snow.*

RIVER LESSON: *Always, change*





## THE BEGINNING

When we make art, we use our eyes and hands. Also, our bodies, our minds, our hearts, our souls. Creating art is an intellectual, psychological, physiological, and spiritual pursuit. We use our senses, even some yet to be named. When engaged in the act of making art, myriad components of our entire being are discharging simultaneously. It is enthralling and compelling. Thrilling. Exhilarating. Sometimes, calming. A complex and unique experience, unlike any other.

I've loved making art since I was a little girl. When I was really young, the boys on our dead-end street would play ball while I sat happily on the curb, mixing dirt and water into mudpies. At school, the margins of my notebooks were crowded with sketches: my preferred way to escape while sitting in class. At home I'd spend hours working on a drawing, enthralled by the way the soft stick of charcoal expressed the emotion I wanted in my work. Art transported me to a mystical world that was free and brilliant and inspiring.

I was seventeen when I started teaching, thrilled to head Arts & Crafts at my beloved sleep-away camp in the Pocono Mountains, elated to be creating and teaching art all day every day. In the ensuing twenty or so years I had the privilege of

sharing my love of art with four-year-olds through high-school seniors on both sides of the country. For all of them, my avid hope was to nurture the joys of art making and to proffer creativity as a path for observing and responding to our world and ourselves.

Some years back, I left the San Francisco Bay area and my job teaching art at a prominent private school. I landed in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. After a few years of painting, drawing, and raising my children, I considered my job options. It was a regular discussion with my dear friend, Judy Segal. Back and forth we tossed around what work might interest me. One thing I knew for sure was that I didn't want to stray from art. Other friends had long suggested that I teach adults, but I wasn't convinced. I didn't want to teach painting or drawing; there were already very capable people doing that.

Then one day, after a series of emails back and forth, Judy wrote, "I think you should teach a class called Releasing the Creative Powers Within." The idea resonated instantly. I could see it: I would create a safe, nurturing space where creativity could flow unfettered. Authority would be in the hands of the student; I would be less a teacher and more of a trailblazer, gently guiding and pointing out the cool sights along the river of creative endeavors, sharing methods to access and express whatever was found along the way. Now this was something I could get into.

The class would be for women only, to allow for the greatest degree of comfort. I would work alongside them, modeling the process. If they needed help or advice I could easily stop what I was doing to guide them back on course. Technique would come, but on an as-needed basis. Steering the boat would be

their personal vision. Experiential learning, driven by desire.

I would show the students works by historic and current artists to provide inspiration and reassurance that it was indeed worthwhile to create. I would use music, poetry, nature, writing, and jumping-off points to help them find their way in. An atmosphere of acceptance and compassion would allow and encourage voices within to rise up and release in the form of artistic expression.

A few months after Judy's prescient email, I opened up my studio to my first class of six women. The title: *Releasing the Creative Powers Within*.

When I opened my doors, I knew what I'd be bringing: a lifetime of guiding others in the making of art, a supreme regard for the spirit of creativity, a strong belief in every person's right to self-expression, and an abiding appreciation for the journey of self-discovery.

But I really had no clue what the women would bring. Though I am one myself, I had no idea of the depth and kindness of women. Moreover, I did not anticipate the profound transformative shifts these classes would spur in their lives, or the truths they would unearth and share.

Since that first day, scores of amazing women have taken seats around my studio table. They've included lawyers and psychotherapists, a practicing anesthesiologist, yoga instructors, a newspaper columnist, school teachers, a dental hygienist, poets, a nurse practitioner, life coaches, a financial analyst, realtors, a childcare worker, an architect, a congressional lobbyist, and on

and on. Some were mothers with children still at home, some had children grown and out of the house, and some were young and single. I've had classes with a fifty-year age span in a single group of twelve women.

In the pages that follow, I describe my philosophy of creativity. I share *river lessons*: thoughts on nature and life garnered from my walks by the Potomac.

And I tell the women's stories. I describe how creating a womb-like vessel allowed Faith to grieve for a baby miscarried years before; how Jess' exploration of fear let her come to terms with abuse suffered as a child; how Kim turned a handful of clay into a powerful talisman that helped her cope with her teenage son's cancer.

I quote the women as they reflect on their lives and their art, and as they uncover inner complexities, discover core beliefs, rid themselves of unproductive patterns, find new truths, and forge new paths. Through their stories and the accompanying photographs, you'll see how art has awakened, enriched, and deepened their lives. Creativity holds profound treasures for every one of us, and that is the ultimate message I hope you will take from this book.

The portraits and stories that follow are true. The names have been changed for the sake of privacy. I thank each of these women for their openness and generosity in allowing me to share their stories.

*Wiley and I are stretched out on our favorite rock. The river, just below, roars as the water whirls by. I close my eyes to hear. The call of a crow. A pileated woodpecker tap-tap-tapping on a tree. The mating songs of the cicadas growing louder and louder and then quieting down again. I blink my eyes open to a half dozen goslings gliding in a line.*

RIVER LESSON: *Follow your instincts*



## ART IS OUR BIRTHRIGHT

It's a desire. A yearning. For some, it's a need. To express ourselves. To make a mark. We are drawn to create something where there was nothing. Consider young children and their boundless delight as they color or play with clay. Or hammer wood. This is where we all begin. Creativity comes to us instinctively. It is our birthright.

Long ago art was intertwined with everyday life. Our ancestors coiled the clay bowls they cooked in, sewed the clothes they wore, hammered their own tools. And when they made their pots they didn't stop at making them functional, they designed them to be unique and beautiful. They dyed flax to make their clothing colorful. Art and life entwined. We know that people have been drawing and painting at least since we lived in caves; we are so fortunate to still have the exquisite cave paintings they were moved to make. This is our heritage, the legacy of each and every one of us. As long as there have been people, in all corners of the earth, we have been making art. It is a natural, primal facet of being human.

During my years working with children, many parents furtively shared with me a sense of remorse for the loss of creativity in their own lives. Some recalled a precipitating

incident that ruined it for them: the harsh judgments of a teacher, expectations they felt unable to fulfill, or just a natural stumbling point in their art with no one to help carry them over. But, to a person, they felt the loss and wished to have the wondrous sense of creating back in their lives again. They envied their children.

I believe this loss is even more profound than many of us realize. These adults, and so many others, have lost not only the wonder of their own creativity, but much more, because, through art:

- We can express ourselves in ways that words cannot. Making art is a unique mode of expression like no other.
- We can see our world more deeply. When we draw, we see in a way that is so clear, so attuned, that we get to see unheralded beauty even in the commonplace.
- We can view the creativity of others with newfound appreciation and enjoyment.
- We can discover thoughts and feelings we never knew we had, learning about ourselves and others along the way.
- We can enjoy the feel of a soft pastel as it warms the paper, our body and chalk moving in tandem, as we dance with the muse.

In adulthood, when making art ceases to be *child's* play, a kind of elite status emerges, an unspoken conviction that if you are not a professional artist you have no real right to make art. Either you have talent or you don't, and if you don't, then don't bother. People buy into this theft of their birthright, relying on the oft-repeated refrain: "I can't even draw a straight line." Well, since when was drawing a straight line a prerequisite for sketching? We have rulers for that. There are many kinds of media for the making of art and endless ways of being creative. Drawing is just one.

Tell me, why is there this exclusionary distinction between art and the rest of life's great pleasures? If you're not born a virtuoso pianist, do you not still learn to play the piano? And do you not still enjoy it? It's gratifying, even if you're not a prodigy, even if you don't have a special talent. Even though you're not Tiger Woods, do you not still enjoy swinging a golf club? Why should art be any different? We can each learn to improve and progress, to become a more proficient draughtsman if that's what we want, or more skilled at throwing a pot on the potter's wheel, or we can learn to weld metal or blow glass. But no matter the medium, or the mode, it's ours for the taking. For the freedom. For what we might learn about ourselves. For possibility's sake. For the sheer joy of it!



*Today the water is high and muddy, gushing from the series of storms we've had the last couple of days. Wiley and I sit on our rock. Glittering in the murky water below are dozens of fish struggling to swim upstream. In the span of a half hour, I watch hundreds of them force their way beside the rocks, through the rush of the channel. Some are driven back, but turn around to try again. Just beyond there is a little inlet, water calm and smooth. Once there, the fish dwell a while, resting from their labors.*

RIVER LESSON: *Struggle reaps reward*



## DAY 1

When I began the classes, my idea was to offer an inspiring, supportive place for women, a respite from their busy, caretaking days. I wanted to offer my students the opportunity to rediscover their creativity and open doors of possibility. I hoped to help them let go, to give them time when they could just be, and more than anything, I hoped to give them a place where they could feel free.

I wasn't sure who would come, whether women would be open to the experience, or what they'd think. This was Bethesda, a suburb of Washington, after all. Here, in the D.C. area, people can be so conservative. Would anyone take the chance and "come to some stranger's home for hours," as one of my students once quipped, to a class called *Releasing the Creative Powers Within*? I didn't know if I could even get one class of six women together. But they came. In fact, the class filled up so quickly that I offered a second section before I even started teaching the first. It seemed that women were hungry for something. So, I had two classes of six women each and I was ready to go. I was thinking I wouldn't do things a whole lot differently from when I worked with children: teach with respect and enthusiasm for the women's creative impulses.

But on the very first day of the very first class, I realized that this would be different from all my prior years of teaching. I told the women a bit about myself and my hopes for the class. I let them know that my studio was a sacred space, that almost no one had ever been allowed in there. Until then. I advised them that no inner critics would be permitted in the space; we would let them sail away through the windows. I told them that this time and this work was just for them, that there would be an opportunity to share their work and their process, but it would be absolutely voluntary to allow for total freedom and openness.

Then, almost in passing, I asked what brought them to the class. I expected they would say they wanted to learn how to make art, unleash their creativity — quick, perfunctory answers. But instead there was an outpouring. And that's when I began to grasp what we were opening up. The women began to speak about families who depended on them, demanding jobs, sick kids: the strains and pulls of women's lives.

They explained that these couple of hours they'd set aside for themselves were rare and precious ones. Gina said, "I've spent the last couple of years hospicing three relatives — my father, my grandmother, and my aunt — and now I need to take care of myself." Julia talked about the loss of her very closest friend who had passed away just a couple of months before, and her hope to do some artwork around that loss. Another told us how, though her mother was an artist, as a child she had been scolded for using her mother's art supplies and working "the wrong way." I suddenly realized: this is going to be very different from what I'd foreseen. This is going to be intense. Deep. And very, very meaningful.