

My Holy Grail

(Note: This is a story about recognizing and accepting that the need for artistic expression can be so compelling that any amount of suppression will only make it harder and harder to ignore. Like love, you need to be ALL IN before you can truly experience the feeling. I fought it for as long as I could; but in the end, I had to acknowledge her – as well as those who inspired and motivated me along the way.)

The smoke kept blowing into my face, so I asked Cara if she wouldn't mind moving upwind of the backyard fire. The discussion was too good and I didn't want the distraction. Only a few years past her days at Iowa State and recently engaged, Cara looked more like every girl in a soap commercial than someone with a 9 to 5 job wanting to 'do more' with their art. Photos of her work revealed that she was not only good, she could spread that talent across all kinds of media. But that's not why I decided to answer her question about pursuing her art. I liked her passion; plus, she had an earnestness that made you want to match it.

Looking around to make sure no one could hear me, I leaned in and said, "I found the Holy Grail of art." She was young, so I wasn't too frustrated when I had to explain what 'Holy Grail' meant. I told her she needed to choose the media that she truly enjoyed working in, to select subjects that spoke to her and, most importantly, to tell us what they're saying. I promised her that if she kept doing that over and over again, she would develop a recognizable, signature style that would make people point at something they've never seen before and exclaim, "That's definitely a Cara!"

She liked that and while looking at my artwork on her phone she asked me one of my all-time favorite questions, "How would you describe *your* style?"

Without hesitation, I admitted that my work is what happens when fine art, an infographic, and the back of a cereal box all run into each other.

Cara laughed. "That's perfect."

Since that fortuitous back yard chat, I often thought that I should write about how I found the Holy Grail but add something that I didn't share with Cara on that cool autumn Saturday evening. I didn't mention that I needed to make peace with it first.

The Early Years



At 10 years old, I should've been more focused on improving my little league batting average; instead, I was angling to get a sheet of my mom's oversized and expensive drawing paper because the team strikeout king had big plans for it. But in order to get my hands on it, I had to produce a well thought out and detailed sketch that would, understandably, assure my mom that her professional grade paper wouldn't be wasted. To her, this was fair and just; to me it was the end of the world as I knew it.

I tried explaining by pointing to my head and saying, "It's all up here!" No dice. So, after throwing myself on my bed in a fit of tears lamenting how life isn't fair and how impossible it would be to make a sketch – I started sketching. I remember feeling so proud because I didn't do just one sketch; I did like three or four.

When presented to my mom, instead of immediately being handed the precious sheet of paper, I was shocked to hear, "What's this?"

Incredulous, I replied, "What do you mean? I did a bunch!"



My mom then went on to explain that scribbles in boxes no bigger than sugar packets wouldn't cut it. Eventually, the prized paper was flowing my way only because I was buying it with money earned doing odd jobs around the neighborhood. Although my financial picture had changed drastically, my messy miniaturized two-minute sketch work remained – and I *still* do it the same way today.

As I progressed through school, I was quickly gaining the moniker of being artistic; but inside I was struggling in my art classes. The traditional subjects and conventional approaches didn't interest me. The more emphasis on realism, perspective, and technique, the more I wanted to throw my pencils and brushes in the trash and take more batting practice. My whole life at that time was rife with structure and expectation. The last thing I needed was to take the one thing that freed me from constraint and turn it into more school work. No thanks.

The Barnes Foundation

It wasn't until my senior year of high school when I learned that art could be an expressive outlet and not just an assignment judged by a ribbon or grade. I was given the opportunity to study art history and art appreciation at the renowned Barnes Foundation just outside Philadelphia. My instructor was Violette de Manzia, an 83-year-old woman who always wore

black and looked more like an older version of Morticia from the *Addams Family* television show than a famous art historian.



A typical lecture went like this: Ms. De Manzia would instruct gloved docents to bring out one or more original works of Renoir, Cézanne, Matisse, Degas, Monet, Van Gogh, Picasso, or some other impressionist or modern painter; then, while flanked by priceless works of art displayed on heavy wooden easels, she'd carefully explain what was going on in the world at that time and what these masters were trying to say about it. And there it was. The lightbulb went on, and for the first time, I realized that art could be more than just attracting eyeballs and oohs and ahhs – it could be your voice.

Violette de Manzia died in 1988, a mere 6 years after I completed her program as a 17-year-old. Little did I know at that time how legendary she was and how her lectures would influence the purpose and intention of my work to this very day.

Los Angeles

While Ms. De Manzia was ascending to a place reserved for fine art royalty, I was busy speeding along US Interstate 10 somewhere in Texas on my way to Southern California from North Carolina. In the bed of my pickup (where I slept most nights), I had only my most prized possessions: a boom box, a mountain bike and my artwork. Like most twenty somethings with a degree in their back pocket, I was looking for a job that would bring me my share of the American dream. I actually found that opportunity in the biotech industry where I held a wide variety of positions ranging from genetic engineer to business analyst. With such scientific and managerial focuses, one would think that an art background would've been useless and put on ice; instead, it was omnipresent and clearly one of the secrets to my success. At least that's what I was concluding as I walked out of the security office after having returned my employee badge and office key as a company-wide layoff ended my 20-year career. Peers of mine who suffered the same fate were quick to send out resumes and fill out online job applications to resume turning their professional skills into paychecks. I remember getting caught up in the frenzied stampede with them – how else would I know that filling out online applications obliterate all hope on earth?

It was during this time that I noticed a strong correlation between spending hours on third-party job recruitment websites and riding my bike. The mere thought of having to retype my responsibilities of a position I held ten years earlier – despite it being clearly stated on the uploaded resume – would result in an almost knee-jerk reaction to put miles on my bike. Yes, this was pure, unadulterated procrastination but it gave me time to think about what I truly wanted. Maybe the layoff wasn't so bad after all. Slowly, as the miles came and went, I began

thinking about contribution. Some of the contributions I made over my career impacted the very culture of the company I had worked for. What made that so gratifying for me was getting people to see something from a completely different perspective. But isn't that what most artists try to do? As my bike careened past gated Malibu compounds, my face lit up from the setting sun reflecting off the Pacific. I recalled my time at the Barnes Foundation and decided then and there to immerse myself into art and find out if I really did have something to say.

A New Start



My little drafting table with the clamped swing-arm lamp and desk chair looked pretty pathetic pushed up against the one window in an upstairs bedroom, but at least it looked over the community pool and got plenty of Southern California sunshine. Over shouts of kids splashing in the water and a steady diet of sports talk radio, it was here where I began my journey back to a passion that had never really been extinguished. Over the next 10 years, my little drafting table supported more than 200 art projects ranging from pen and ink to acrylic painting and giclée reproductions. First, there was the black and white period. Then there was the run of minimal color compositions that eventually exploded into nothing *but* color. Although the output was diverse, each art piece came with a corresponding abstract that explained the intention of the work and correlated it to popular social observation and related phenomenon. So, as it turned out – I *did* have a voice!

Jim

As art show requests and sales inquiries started to increase, so did my need for framing and reproductions. Lucky for me, I found an amazing little shop only three and a half bike miles away. Walking into Museum Quality Framing was like walking into a place where you'd want to hang out all day, drink coffee, see what customers brought in, eavesdrop on conversations, and generally distract the staff with your incessant questions and commentary.

Instead of shooing me out with the rest of the riffraff, the owner, Jim Brent, let me hang out and even invited me to go behind the scenes and see his workshop which was on the other side of a swinging door just off of the main showroom of displayed art and countless frame samples. I felt pretty special seeing 'where the magic happened' because Jim had everything you would possibly need to reproduce anything and frame it. This was a world that was very foreign to me and Jim seemed more like a cross between the Mad Hatter and The Great and Powerful Oz than a store owner. When Jim wasn't sitting behind two giant computer screens, he was tending to an oversized ink jet printer like a diligent drone scurrying around an

impatient queen bee or firing up the incredibly loud frame-making machine that seemed everywhere at once. It didn't take long for me to realize that Jim was freaking brilliant, and all I wanted to do was learn from him.



A friendship ensued and I found myself being exposed to new media, new ideas and new business. Soon, I was a regular at the shop and business was rolling along for the both of us. Besides me, Jim worked with many artists, some local, some far away – some famous, some not so famous. It didn't take long for me to figure out why Jim was so popular. It turns out that the relationship between an artist and the person who reproduces their work is not only critically important – it *will* literally determine if you're miserable or on top of the world that day. I can relate to this because there's nothing more frustrating for an artist than to see that the colors DON'T MATCH between the reproduction and the original. Apparently, getting ink jet colors to match original pigment color *or* computer graphics (color by light) is an art form in and of itself – and Jim was a guru.

When I think back on those five years I spent at Museum Quality Framing, I see Jim as Sam, the bartender from the television show *Cheers* and me as Norm, the beer-swilling regular who made the bar his 'home away from home.' But when I close my eyes and visualize what Jim taught me, Jim's shoulder always obliterates about a third of the mental picture. That's because I must've logged at least three thousand hours peering over it as he printed, framed, and performed what looked to be sorcery with Adobe's Photoshop on his ginormous Macintosh.

I had never really understood what computer graphics were all about until I watched Jim do things in seconds that would take me hours and hours to do by hand. I was mesmerized by the possibilities and felt like I had just stumbled upon the greatest secret that had been kept from me my entire life. The lightbulb went on again, and suddenly I knew I needed my own Apple computer. Jim and I used to joke that we had that enviable relationship immortalized by roles played by Tom Cruise and Cuba Gooding Jr. in the sports agent movie, *Jerry Maguire*. We even went as far as imagining other artists complaining to their art reproduction guys by saying, "Dude, why don't we have that kind of relationship?" So, it's probably not hard to fathom that Jim accompanied me to the Apple Store to make sure I bought the right computer.

And just like that, my upstairs spare bedroom started looking less like Grandma's craft room and more like a computer graphics lab. Gone were the cumbersome easels, messy paints, and jars of brushes and pens. In their place, I had my new computer, a drawing tablet, a stylus, a 'Photoshop for Dummies' book (not kidding) and umm . . . that's it! Wow. I could have had guests stay in there and my setup wouldn't be disturbed!

Graphic Art

When I first started creating art on my computer, it felt more like I had been given the keys to a magic carpet that didn't come with instructions on how to fly it. The excitement was there but so was the fear that I had strayed too far away from my art roots. Surprisingly, over time, I realized that my mind was totally wired to create this way. I wasn't just comfortable; I was like a pig who just swan dived into the sloppiest mud puddle ever. Being an ambidextrous circus sideshow freak since middle school, I noticed something interesting: my left hand was in charge of the fine details using the stylus while my right could make sweeping lines with the track pad while operating the computer at the same time. I know what you're thinking, and I agree – my left hand is such a slacker! In all seriousness, I believe that the use of both hands gave me access to parts of my mind that I hadn't used before. Not only were the creative juices flowing fast and furiously, they were resulting in art work that was even more meaningful and satisfying than before.

Everybody knows that anything cool in life has a price tag, and transitioning from fine art to computer graphic art isn't an exception. Besides seeing gallery and show requests diminish, I noticed an ever-increasing distance between me and the local fine art community in general. I'm going out on a limb by writing this; but as subtle as it was, there's an unmistakable superiority that fine artists can waft over artists who use a computer because 'it's not REAL art.' I know that disclosure reeks of my own insecurity but I can't deny feeling it back then.



Another adage that comes to mind is that when one door closes, three others open. What? That's not how the saying goes! Well, it was for me in this case. Digital art gave way to establishing a stronger internet presence, product licensing, and advertising. Before I knew it, my work was landing on liquor bottles, surfboards, iPods, gaming consoles, laptops, cell phones, album covers, and so much more. Commissions weren't only up; some were even coming in from civic institutions like discovery centers and schools. It was as if I had the Midas touch and could do no wrong. I even went to a swanky, invite-only art show in Los Angeles featuring the iconic Peter Max without an invite and ended

up having a quasi-private one-on-one discussion with him about the relationship between art and science! It was a pretty surreal moment because having grown up in Philadelphia, I would see his famous artwork throughout the city. I remember feeling enamored with his bold subjects, loose perspective, bright colors, and creative freedom. Hmmm. Ring a bell? The absolute best is when someone looks at my portfolio and then asks me if I ever heard of Peter Max. Then, in about one second, they ask me why I'm smiling so big.

The Party's Over

If success can be described as 'the thrill of victory,' I was on my way to 'the agony of defeat.' With several years of wins here and there, some big, some small; I began feeling more and more frustrated. Wins were growing farther and farther apart, and they weren't building off of each other. It seemed like after each success, I would drop back into the abyss of obscurity making me feel like I was back at square one. Licensing agreements started becoming more like contract disputes, art show invites seemed more like popularity contests, completed commissions became money collection grinds, and I even started having problems with my good friend, Jim, back at *Cheers*. Nothing was going 'according to plan,' and I felt my bitterness morphing into an attitude of 'me against the world.'

If this art autobiography is giving the impression that my fall from grace was an overnight thing, I'm sorry because it wasn't. Left in the wake of this slide were once significant relationships, both personal and professional. In their place loomed anger and resentment because never in my life had I tried so hard and *not* had resounding, sustaining success – and *this* effort was coming from my heart and soul! I just couldn't wrap my head around it. What was I missing? What was I doing wrong? I had previous success – check. My work was getting better and better – check. I had established a recognizable signature style – check. The messaging behind my art was positive and relatable – check. I had an awesome website, a social media presence, and even a monthly newsletter – check, check, and check! I didn't know it then but I was having one hell of a pity party for myself that culminated into one last temper tantrum – I tossed my computer in a drawer, deleted my social media accounts and blew up my website. I felt like that long-ago middle schooler who wanted to throw his art in the trash and go back to being mediocre on the baseball diamond. This time, some 35 years later, I actually did quit.

Boise

Even though the windows were tightly closed, I could still hear the roar of the crowd from Albertsons Stadium in southeast Boise, Idaho. From the oversized antique walnut desk in my one-bedroom apartment, I could literally see the 'Home of the Broncos' as it towered well above the leafless trees. Plenty of early winter snow dominated the landscape making it feel warm and cozy in my perch on the top floor. While working on an art piece called, 'Capitol Chill,' – the first in three years – I remember being mildly amused by how the crowd noise didn't sync with what my radio was emitting as it was tuned into the same game. *That's right*, I recall thinking as a new, BSU sports homer, *There's a six-second delay in TV and radio broadcasts*. I was totally engrossed in what was on my computer but my mind was free to wonder about such frivolities – something I hadn't allowed before.

A lot of things were different and none more evident than in the way I saw my passion for art. Gone were the unrealistic expectations, the need to monetize everything and the pandering for approval. In their place, I felt lighthearted, centered, and grateful. I realized that if you're lucky enough to even have a special gift, you should concern yourself with giving that gift – especially if it's positive, noble in nature, and makes people happy. And there it was – the crystal-clear answer to the question I had asked years before. Now I *knew* what I was doing wrong.

The three-year hiatus of self-loathing and general dislike for anything other than bike riding had shockingly little effect on my ability to create art. In fact, not only was my signature style back in full force, the work was better! Was it because I took a mental break? Maybe; but I don't think so. I think it stems from something I learned in Victor Frankl's heartbreaking yet monumental book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Sadly, his insightful contributions come from having survived four years in Auschwitz during World War II. In it, I recall two unforgettable quotes: "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves" and "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing – the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." Powerful words to say the least; perhaps maybe even a tad melodramatic for a guy who merely lost his art mojo, eh? Overstated or not, Dr. Frankl's words hit home and got me to pull my head out of my 'you know what' and get it focused on making up for lost time. 'Capitol Chill' was the first of twelve art compositions making up my Boise Series, a self-appointed, yearlong art project inspired by a city that inspired me.



Even if I live to be 100, I will forever be astonished at how the universe will start cooperating *if* your heart is in the right place. Soon after I started uploading my Boise-themed artwork to resurrected social media and a brand-new website, an influx of welcomed commentary began finding its way to me. Before I knew it, I was showing my art portfolio to the mayor, city council members, and other prominent civic leaders. When requests for prints and greeting cards started coming in from local shops –

including the gift shop in the State Capitol – I had to start looking for a local art reproduction person to partner with me. Right away, nervousness set in. Clearly, I wasn't in L.A. anymore; plus, the Mad Hatter back at Museum Quality Framing had spoiled me rotten and ruined me for all others.

Bob



The door of the plain grey stucco building on Main Street was locked yet I had an appointment with Bob Pleasure (love the name), owner of Riverworks Imaging on the westside of the city. I heard a voice from inside say, “Hold on!” even though cars were whizzing by me on a busy weekday afternoon. As I waited, I reminded myself that Bob was probably going to be an average guy doing average work despite good reviews on Yelp and Google. After all, what could I expect after working with The Great and Powerful Oz? Walking into Bob’s one-man studio was like smelling fresh cut grass – it took me back to a time and place of sheer nostalgia. He had all the same equipment, tools, and supplies; and I liked the familiarity. From the layout and tidiness of the place, I could tell Bob was organized. When he saw me notice all the different reproduction orders in various stages on the oversized worktable, Bob set about explaining his craft to me.

I remember thinking, *You’ve got be kidding me*, as he recounted his days as an early graphic designer for many well-known companies, including an upstart computer company named Apple. Not only was this guy a reproduction maestro like Jim, he understood what it takes to create graphic art. Bingo. I guess lightning *can* strike twice.

Just like my days with Jim, I relished going to Bob’s studio. Maybe it’s the same for writers who hang around bookstores. Until my work is printed by Bob, it’s sort of like when a tree falls in the woods and nobody hears it. Did it really fall? Did I *really* do an art piece about the Boise Zoo? Do I even exist? Umm, sorry; I didn’t mean to get all existentialistic on you. One of my greatest joys in life is seeing my work on Bob’s oversized worktable with all the other artists. There’s a certain validation that I get from seeing that; plus, the colors are spot on, so the rest of my day is spent on cloud nine.

Now

It wasn’t like I ran out of inspiration when it came to the ‘City of Trees,’ but I needed to spread my wings and see what a rekindled love of art could do beyond a Boise theme. Like an old faucet handle that breaks off after one rusty turn, my artwork was happily flowing with no way to shut it off. There was the 6-piece series for the Conejo Valley Guide in Los Angeles, an online kiosk for Ventura County; then, a 6-piece series on Idaho State Parks. After several commercial projects, I spent a year creating a 12-piece series that relates fun facts about astrophysics and quantum theory to the human experience. Right now, at the time of this writing, I’m working on the third of twelve art compositions about nature; and, dedicating the work to finding the right combination to unlock hope and happiness in a world that suddenly feels like a Rubik’s Cube.

Peace



With my story told, my mind wanders back to that long-ago conversation with Cara over the crackling of the fire and the din of friendly backyard conversations, and I wonder if she figured out what I failed to warn her about. Once you're all in, your passion becomes the cross that you bear. I imagine we'll meet again, and when we do, I'll tell her to take solace in a famous quote from Bob Marley, the late great Jamaican singer and song writer, and remind her that the referenced woman is how I see my love of art: "If she's amazing, she won't be easy. If she's easy, she won't be amazing. If she's worth it, you won't give up. If you give up, you're not worthy. Truth is, everybody is going to hurt you; you just gotta find the ones worth suffering for."

And with that, I understood my own suffering and made peace with it – I guess that's why artists are referred to as 'tortured souls.' I offer my story, my Holy Grail, my olive branch, to those who shared their wisdom with me, those who believed in me and to the rest of the world. Thanks for your patience. It's good to be back.

The End

Chuck Trunks (12/2020)