

Chapter 3: Entering a Fractal World of Gratitude (2006)

"It is the work itself that rocks the mountain."

-- Robert Genn



Silence

*What I awoke to
was the sound of silence.
Absolute silence.*

*And yet it was not silent,
real or phantom, the whoosh-thunk of the
oxygen machine still
filled the room.*

*The sound of morning
birds speckled the
new dawn air.
Only one sound
was missing
but that*

one

*piece missing
engulfed
all others,
changed life into
before and after,
broke the world
into pieces present and
missing*

*left me
listening,
waiting,
childlike,
for it to come
back,*

please.



There is a quiet that happens after the drama of death. After the calls have been made. After all the details have been attended to. After all the friends and family have returned to their lives. In that quiet, I realized that I did not have a life to return to. For three years, life had been doctors and the routines of medications and the needs of one beleaguered body and soul. Richard's death ended my role

as partner and caregiver. With no rudder and my anchor out of the water, I drifted aimlessly.

Quiet spread out around me like a thick fog that dampened and slowed everything. There was nothing left to do. My innovation consulting business had gradually dropped away through the years as I cancelled events and had to refuse invitations. Now I did not have even the brain power to think about renewing it. Suddenly I wanted nothing more than to escape to sunshine, noise and life. I wanted to be someone, anyone, who had not just lost her husband and life as she knew it.

Finding a plan.

I am not sure how I found it, but one night I stumbled across an Internet description of a digital collage workshop scheduled in a small fishing village south of Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. I had been doing paper collage for a few years and loved it, but could never quite master glue, so all of my collages wound up wrinkled or bubbled. The instructor's digital collage work inspired me; maybe I could do that. The workshop promised a week of immersion in Photoshop, photography and escape. Instantly I had a plan. Book the workshop. Buy tickets. Buy Photoshop. Find passport. Move.

Photoshop concerned me. I had never used it and I worried about being the class dunce, but the momentum of escape carried me past that worry. I planned to go down a day early to reacquaint myself with Puerto Vallarta, but the airline had other plans. The plane had a problem and left me with no way to connect with the flight out of Los Angeles, so I had to return home and wait. The next day the same plane still had the same problem. Was this an omen that I should not

go? Maybe I would be too far behind the class. Maybe I should just stay home...go quietly into that good night.

The instructor assured me that it would be fine so on the third try I left Fresno, flew to Puerto Vallarta, taxied to Boca de Tomatlan and found a young boy who loaded my luggage into a tiny ponga and poled me across a shallow river where life said, "Try this."

Boca. Just the word releases a thousand images, sounds and smells. Fishermen in their boats trailed by pelicans motoring out of the river inlet in the morning at high tide and walking them back at low tide later in the afternoons, still followed by the flocks of pelicans. Church bells and mariachi music weaving together on Sunday morning. Workers carrying heavy sacks of concrete up the 85 steep steps to a house they were building on the side of the mountain. A small girl playing with a pet mongoose, a grandmother washing clothes in the river. Old dogs sleeping in bright turquoise plastic chairs. Birthday parties that filled the beach with people, young and old, games, music, food and laughter. An open-air, tiled art studio that invited creativity in to play while overlooking the river comings and goings.

Slowly life shifts.

As it turned out, as the only student in the workshop, I had [Robert Masla's](#) undivided attention for a week. We went on long photo excursions, snorkeled, explored Photoshop, talked art, made art and slipped into Boca time, slow and gentle, healing. For that week, grief stood waiting on the other side of the river, the other side of the border, the other side of time. The warmth and beauty of Boca and Bob's gentle guidance made me forget the world that I left.

The next several days opened a door that changed life forever. Each morning I would go out with my camera, walk along the river and into another place and time, a proverbial “sleepy fishing village,” a world away from the ever-connected, ever-rushing online life. The river path connected the school and the village, and served as a pedestrian Internet for people walking from one place to another, sharing news, stories and concerns along the way. The protective and isolating bubble that separates those of us in more modern environments seemed missing here. The path I walked literally crossed the doorstep of one of the houses I passed and just walking by drew me into their doors- and windows-open lives and made me feel like a guest in the brief time it took to pass.

One morning, Bob and I took our cameras and walked a different route. On that walk, I learned the difference between looking for attention-grabbing, beautiful, well-composed “pictures” and gathering compelling images that might be used in collages. My perspective shifted from the general to the specific, inviting me into new layers of detail, like fractals continuously unfolding into something new, and yet similar, the closer I looked. A garden of flowers becoming petals on a flower becoming lines and swirls on the petal flowing into even deeper patterns within those patterns.

I meet the rooster.

When we returned, I had my first experience of layering images into a new story. Instantly captivated, I spent hours in thrall to a new master. For the rest of the week, I shot almost a thousand images: colors, textures, icons, slivers of meaning which seemed to have their own life as they called to each other and snuggled into their new relationships. One colorful, strutting rooster who preened as I snapped his picture, absolutely demanded his space on the page of

collage after collage such as the one at the beginning of this chapter. He seemed to insist that I “wake up.”

Another surprising gift showed up at week’s end: poetry. Years before, right after I turned 50, I had taken a writing workshop with Natalie Goldberg in Taos. Unexpectedly, poetry started bubbling up on my long morning walks.

At the time, it seemed like my own repressed creativity breaking free, but since then I have talked to dozens of women who report a similar experience of something new coming forth in their 50s. We think of that age, with the onset of menopause, as a “drying up,” a loss of vitality, when, in actuality, it is a birthing of something new, a new receptivity to spirit and creativity.

Birth, whether of a child or a new project, involves the pain of change and a widening of things that sometimes do not want to widen. Birthing something new happens in the dark, uncharted territory of Dragon Country, the first step toward the doorway to Wonderland. The joy and fascinating uncertainty of a new creation pull us forward, and give us the energy to take the risk involved with change.

In the years of Richard’s illness, poetry and all writing had slipped away, hardly noticed as attention turned to more immediate concerns. The poem that came as my tribute to Boca surprised me, and gave me hope that perhaps, just perhaps, my words would return. The first stanza of the poem below, named after one of the fishing boats I watched each morning, reflects that uncertainty of change. The full Boca poem is available in the Poetry Appendix.

Quien Sabe

*Who knows?
Who knows what this day will bring?
Who knows what this life, this year,
This minute will offer us?*

The trip to Boca reminded me that life is for the living. Life is for living, and the gift of life must be experienced and appreciated. When loss and grief come into our lives, there can be an overwhelming feeling that “It is over,” that life will never be joyful again. However, we are the ones attributing that meaning to the loss; it is not the total or only reality of it. Loss can also mean that a page has turned and we have a new invitation to live life in a different direction. However, white pages and blank canvases scare and intimidate us. What if we mess it up? What if we do not like what we see? What if we make a mistake? What if people think we are not being respectful to the dead?

All of those thoughts coursed through my head, but life pulled me, called to me and, I knew I had to do something new, be somewhere new. I am not sure what force of the Universe, chance or synchronicity, took me to Boca, but there I found one of the biggest gifts the Universe has offered me and one that I probably could not have received if I had not fallen into one of the darkest holes life had to offer.

Grief is a personal journey. Each person needs to find his or her own way. Some of us long to be held in the sheltering arms of life’s familiar routine; others of us yearn to experience a new wilderness. Learning to listen with patience and gentleness to our own needs and rhythms brings us back into life even when the ground beneath us turns to slush. At those times, all we can do is to listen carefully to the whisperings of life, and take a step toward it to see how it feels.

Tiny, tentative step or a flying leap, it does not matter as much as that it points toward joy and reconnects us to life. Some might see life reopening by simply holding a newborn and seeing its future foreshadowed in a tiny smile. Some might find that their garden reawakens their joy. For me, learning to see and gather the infinite details of the Universe into a new form of art, and the return of my words gradually and gently brought me back to consciousness.

Gratitude is a harbinger of healing, the first robin of spring. Every day now, gratitude fills my heart for the gifts that came in this dark package. Perhaps, that is the true bottom line: after the terrible wrench of loss, anything, tiny or huge, that brings us back to gratitude is life-giving and healing. Our new life begins the first time we can truly say and think “thank you” after our heart has been broken. Meister Eckhardt said, *“If the only prayer you say in your entire life is 'thank you'...that would suffice.”*

Somehow, we have to return to that prayer of gratitude, or life appears as a harsh and meaningless desert rather than the limitless, flowing, fractal-rainbow of beauty and meaning that stretches before us.

About this Image: *Art is the Key*



The Boca rooster demanded his place on the page. In this one, he tells me to wake up to art, that it is the key to my healing. All the images in this picture came from the village of Boca de Tomatlan, little pieces of reality that transformed into a message that on the other side of the door lay a world I could not see, and that making art could open the door. The sunny face that commands the picture warmed and reassured me that life could be joyful again.

NOTE: See Appendix A for information about the 7 Stages of Grief

Although I do not believe in “stages of grief” since the term implies a linear progression and a fixed cycle of stages, I found this information and the website helpful. If your loss is recent, you might want to review the stages and explore the available information. However, always remember that your journey and the way you experience your loss is uniquely yours. There may be common patterns, but there is no prescription, no “right way” to deal with grief.

Interlude 3: Gems of Heartbreak (2006)

*“When it is over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.*

-- Mary Oliver

Memory is a
grit that polishes
certain moments
until they shine like
multifaceted gems.

Every loss has those moments, some are beautiful, some poignant, some contain the power to crack us open again and again. We can put these gems away in a box that we never open, or we can bring them out once in a while and feel the love that is the fire deep within them. Here are some of the bright, shining memories in my jewelry box. I do not bring them out often, but this morning, through the tears of memory, I can touch the years of joy.



Memory: We have a small open atrium off the dining room of our house in Bakersfield and when we move in, Richard claims it. He is just out of the hospital, and his weight has dropped to 154 on his 5'11" frame. He is weak and the prognosis is short-term. He wants to live. He installs a fountain with his Jaguar-man head from Teotihuacan on top of it and begins to turn the atrium into a sanctuary. He adds slats across the open top to provide shade and puts a wrought-iron bench in the corner. He allows me to add some yellow tulips around the fountain. It is beautiful.

In the afternoons, Richard sits in the atrium and smokes his cigars.

Memory: It is September, 2006, and we are having a small housewarming gathering after our move to the foothills. It is a beautiful, warm fall day. Richard is on a new chemotherapy routine that shows no signs of working. We have set up the fountain in a corner of the deck and Richard's jaguar-man head from Mexico sits on top of it as a reminder of his shamanic journey.

I have gathered some river rocks and put out felt-tip markers. The idea is for each guest to write a word on the rock and add it to the pile around the fountain. I yearn for ritual to extend this moment, to ward off what is so clearly coming. We sit quietly on the deck before people arrive, enjoying the sun and the moment. We decide to create our own rocks. On mine, I write Love. On his, he writes Nagual (a term from his shamanic studies). It tells me that he is already on his journey, leaving our life together for another existence.

Memory: It is quiet. Richard is asleep in his hospital bed in the living room. He has stopped eating and only takes a little juice once in a while. His decline came faster than we expected, and in these

moments, when I thought we would share memories of our times together or thoughts about life and death, there is only silence. I do not know how much time remains, so I sit by his bed, hold his hand and tell him what a good person he is. He has been a loving husband, a caring and supportive father, a kind and generous soul. I tell him how much I love him and go on as long as I can. He does not respond.

Two days later while I am sitting by his bed giving him a sip of water, he says, "I heard you." That is all he said, but I am grateful I had a chance to say what I wanted to say and to know he heard me.

While reliving these memories, it struck me that only because of love do we feel pain. Only by avoiding love can we truly avoid pain. I have heard people say after losing a beloved pet that they will never have another because they "just can not stand to go through the loss again." I understand the feeling. However, is it ever worth not loving again just to avoid not losing again?

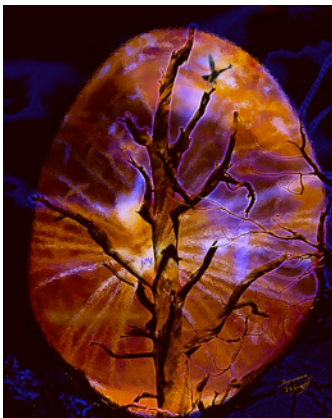
It also occurred to me that love is not "given" to us, it is "loaned" to us. It is never ours to own or to lose. It is borrowed from Source, and when we are done, it returns to Source, and since we are all part of Source, it never truly leaves us. The gift of love is the joy it brings us while it is on loan to us. It is somewhat like when we borrow a book from the library, read it, enjoy it and make it part of us. We eventually return the physical book to the library for another to enjoy, but the story, the information, the insights and elegance of the prose enters our cells, transforms us and becomes forever woven into who we are.

I borrowed Richard's love for twenty-six years, and when it returned to Source, I did not lose it, it still pulsed through every fiber of my being. The only way I could lose it would be to deny it by denying the pain that came when I had to release the embodiment of our love.

I once wrote a poem titled the "Shadow of Time" which shows up in Chapter 6. It ends with the question: "*Where does love go when it dies?*" That line haunted me for years as I wondered if love could die. Now I know that it does not. Even when people are separated by death, divorce or distance, if they were truly bonded by love and not just projection or fantasy, the love that existed between them continues to live.

That does not mean that they always choose to stay together; their journeys may lead them in different directions. However, the love they lent each other is permanently part of each of them. Just as we might forget the characters and plot of a book, we can forget love as it sinks out of sight into the cells of our body. The love is still there though, and lives on, always.

About this Image: *Ancient Mystery*



In a small rock shop in Oakhurst, California, I found a polished amber egg, estimated age 18 million years. Inside the egg waved a delicate milkweed seed. What force so perfectly captured and preserved those delicate filaments? This image became the collage foundation for other elements that created a sense of the ancient wisdom and mystery that surrounds us.

If a fragile bit of fluff can be preserved in a hardened flow of tree resin, and bring us the joy of beauty 18 million years later, perhaps our own polished memories have the power to aid our healing.



Pause and Ponder

- ❖ In spite of your loss, what can you say “thank you” for right now?
- ❖ What brings you joy? Take a moment and make a list of every tiny thing that brings you joy...from a cup of tea to the smell of new-mown grass.
- ❖ How can you nourish your spirit in this moment?
- ❖ Where do you hear life calling you?
- ❖ What are the memories you hold that have the power to break you open?
- ❖ Do you try to bury them or cherish them for the love that forms the core of each one?
- ❖ Do you think love dies?