

Chapter 4: Bolting down the Rabbit Hole (2007 - 2008)

*"And the time came when the risk to remain tight in a bud
was more painful than the risk it took to blossom."*

-- Anais Nin



My bags were barely unpacked from Boca
when the urge to bolt shot through me again.

I had realized several years earlier that I am a flight animal. My first impulse is to run for cover and then assess the situation from a safe distance. I returned from Boca in time for the first Christmas holidays without Richard and a messy family situation that included the breakup of my stepdaughter's relationship.

I longed to bolt, and started looking an escape. I found a kayaking trip to Belize and called my friend Lynne since we had talked often about kayaking together. The timing worked for her and the second week of January we launched a 10-day quest for warm water and bright fish. We connected in the Dallas airport where I could feel myself relaxing into friendship and adventure.

Escaping into beauty.

Long Caye Island is an oasis in the middle of some of the most pristine and turquoise-colored waters in the Carribean, a rustic oasis lacking most modern amenities, offering a pure escape into physical beauty and pleasure. Our thatched huts faced the sea, and the January days often brought passing storms leaving our island paradise in a sultry mood. From my porch, I could see a long pier, and at the end of it, stood a single chair pointed off into the distance. Wet, shiny and gray, it symbolized all the lonely emptiness I felt. It became a focal point for many photos, and the digital collage shown above captures that lonesome ache.

Under the gentle urging of Jes Karper, our singing camp counselor, we tried everything, however, kite kayaking turned out to be the most exciting. It started out as a glorious morning and we decided to paddle to a nearby island and use kites for a little extra speed. Mine was the first kite up and I headed off to the island clearly in sight.

Within minutes, the wind picked up, the rain started, and my kayak flew across the water in a squall so thick the island disappeared in the gray murk. I did not fear drowning in the shallow water, but wondered what would happen if I missed the island, and how I would be found if I did. When I glanced behind me, I could see nothing: no Lynne, no other kayakers, no guides, no island from whence we had

come. I decided that the faster I reached shore, the better, so I held onto the kite in what felt like a hurricane and hoped for the best.

Soon I landed safely on the shore, beached my kayak and ran for shelter under some structures on the island. I could not see anyone or anything else, but soon everyone landed safely on the beach. After the squall passed, we all laughed about our mini-adventure.

Jes, our adventure-prodder and gifted songwriter and singer, also gave us lessons on the natural life of the island. From him, I learned that one lowly algae, zooxanthellae, unseen and unknown until recently, supported the entire ecosystem. It reminded me that life depends as much on things unseen as things seen, such as love and connection, pain and joy, beauty and gratitude. The thought of that tiny algae with the difficult name prompted the poem, “Long Caye Melody,” which begins with a sense of isolation:

*There is a line
That divides the world.
Sky above;
Water below.*

Full poem available in Appendix B: Poetry.

The Belize adventure carried me through a few more weeks as I processed pictures, worked on the collage from the island, sorted out the necessary details of death and life and wondered what was next. Temporary stimulation wears off, however, and soon the wolf, once again, howled and scratched at the door.

An invitation to join a watercolor “Paint Camp” taught by [Fran Larsen](#) in Santa Fe came from an old friend from the InnovationNetwork and provided the next distraction. Watercolor is not my medium, but Fran is a gifted and wise teacher. For a week, I explored watercolor, hung

out with friends, and prowled the art world of Santa Fe. By now, Gary and I talked and emailed daily so I shared my stories with him and once again felt connected.

Our emails grew longer and we talked frequently about our lives and worried about his mom's health. We both adored her and she was the absolute center of Gary's world. Married twice, he had been single for fifteen years, and lived on a ranch in a rapidly growing area outside Tulsa, Oklahoma. He wanted to move to a quieter place in Missouri or Arkansas, and started sending me descriptions of some of the properties he had considered, asking my opinions on each.

Linked by our loneliness, soon after I returned from Santa Fe, he suggested forming an "alliance." Gary has an engineering mindset, and he carefully explained his thinking and how he had considered an alliance with other friends who were also living alone. However, he had decided for one reason or another that they would not work out. An alliance with me where we would live together and take care of his mom seemed like a perfect fit. I grabbed this less than romantic offer like a life raft, flew to Tulsa and began life with Gary.

Brushing aside the cobwebs of reality.

It started out well. We spent long hours retelling our stories and weaving dreams of our future. His mom said it made her bones strong to see us together. Reality showed a few clues to its underbelly, but we brushed them aside like cobwebs. Gary often said that we were like "two peas in a pod." In some quite important ways, such as we liked the same brand of crunchy peanut butter, it was true. Once outside the world of peanut butter, however, things got a little more complicated.

Within a few weeks, we experienced the confusion of joining together and trying to sort out the differences that naturally occur in two mature lives that have taken widely different paths. We found that we did best in bed, cuddling, blithering for hours, and having slow, delightful sex. If we could have stayed in bed, we might have made it, but every time we got out, the “two peas in a pod” thing looked more like a banana trying to comprehend an artichoke. We almost did not speak the same language.

However, we kept trying. We cried a lot and hugged a lot. However, what we did not do was find ways to change that would bridge the differences and strengthen the bond between us. Refusing to admit defeat, we bought a place together in Mountain Home, Arkansas, and moved with his mom to our new life. In the beginning, we explored the Ozarks lake country and focused on the minutia of life, such as breakfast, lunch and dinner, mowing the lawn, playing with Missy, the toy poodle we bought for his mom, and sitting on the front porch on warm afternoons. However, the arrangement of the house with our bedroom next to his mom’s made it awkward for us to spend enough time in bed to smooth over the rough edges.

The economic crisis worsened both of our financial positions, a worry for me, a hard blow for him as his self-identity was deeply embedded in his financial success. Overall, life drifted peacefully although occasionally a rift would tear the fabric of our relationship just a little bit more and we would not know how to repair it. Soon, I began to take mini-escapes that seemed to get longer and further away, first, a hammered dulcimer workshop in Mountain View, just an hour and a half away, then an art workshop in Florida, and another week in Boca de Tomatlan in Mexico with friends.

Coming home always made me feel safe and Gary always seemed happy to have me back. I loved our home and the soft, gentle life we had together with his mom. We had talked about turning our alliance into a marriage, and I convinced myself that if we made that kind of firm commitment to each other, we would find a way to make the needed compromises.

Taking a flying leap.

Since it was 2008 and a leap year, I decided to take advantage of Sadie Hawkins' day and be the one to propose. For three weeks I worked on a proposal booklet that would express my love in a beautiful and moving way through imagery and poetic expression. On the weekend of the 29th, we had to go to Tulsa to take care of some things at his mom's house. Perfect timing. I could give him the proposal while we were alone, and we could talk and make plans.

I almost lost my nerve, but finally I handed it to him and had to leave the room while he read it. When I came back, he asked me if I meant it. I said yes. He didn't say anything else as we got ready for the drive back to Arkansas. Once again during that trip, he asked me if I meant it, and again I said yes. He never mentioned it again. Three months later I came down with a serious virus, and moved into the spare bedroom to avoid spreading the illness. I never moved back into our bedroom, and the drifting apart accelerated.

Down the rabbit hole.

I began to feel as if I had bolted down a rabbit hole into a strange world. Nothing quite fit, and my moods swung wildly back and forth between wanting to stay and be safe and needing to find my own

life. Day by day, however, the painful realization grew that this was not my place, that I was going to have to leave.

I dithered, denied, dawdled and dissembled, and stayed stuck in indecision. Finally, I decided I needed a time-out to rethink everything so I booked a place in the San Diego island-community of Coronado for the month of March, 2009. Dolores, one of my best-friends, lives in Coronado and she welcomed me with a comforting hug as well as a basket of tea and munchies, art supplies and candles.

I settled in and began journaling and creating dreamlike, unsettled images. Gary called every day, acting as if everything were perfectly normal, until I finally had to tell him that I needed some time to think without talking to him. Two weeks later I had recognized how deep my sadness went and how badly bruised my spirit felt.

I wanted to blame Gary, but I couldn't. I had wanted someone to rescue me, to mend my life, and the fantasy of our backstory tossed me clumsily into a place where I did not belong. Instead of mending my own life, I tried to glue two incompatible life-styles together, and, in the process, used up all the available energy that should have been focused on nourishing my spirit and discovering who I wanted to be in the new life that stretched before me.

At the end of my time in Coronado, I called Gary and made one last attempt to see if either of us could see a way to make it work. We couldn't, so I returned to Arkansas, picking up a transformational book titled "*SHED Your Stuff; Change Your Life;*" in the airport on my way. The next week I began shedding and packing, and life began to change in earnest.



Pause and Ponder

- ❖ Have you ever felt like you had fallen into a rabbit hole? What did you learn about yourself on your journey through that strange land?
- ❖ Stretching before you are multiple paths, lives you could live. If you let your imagination run wild, what five lives would you like to live?
- ❖ What new seeds are sprouting? How can you tend and nurture them?

The rejection I felt when Gary refused my proposal haunted me for a long time, until I realized that my whole new life hinged on the closing of that door. From a distance we start to see patterns that are impossible to comprehend when we are in the midst of them. Walking out of one pattern, we enter a new one we never expected.

Another lesson came as Lynne and I ate lunch in the Dallas airport on our way to Belize. She told me a story about always being advised, after the main part of a meal, to *“keep your fork, the best is yet to come.”* With that, she handed me one of the silver plastic forks the restaurant used as their flatware. It became one of my treasures, symbolizing the possibility that life still had dessert to offer.

Change takes energy and commitment and loss changes us. When I think back to Rule #1 (make no major changes in the first year after a significant loss) which I broke with such abandon, I again realized the wisdom of it. We need that time and energy to see who we want to be as we head into our new life.

Every ending contains the seeds of beginning. While they are germinating underground and then sending up tiny sprouts, we may not be able to tell what the seeds will become: weeds or mighty oaks, but they will come forth nonetheless. Our job is to tend them, choose the ones we want as their identities are revealed, and find joy in our new relationship with them.

About this Image: *Alone in the World*



This image amuses me. It captures the essential loneliness that I felt at the time and yet shows me that life is teeming all around me.

Incongruously, the Boca rooster traveled all the way to Belize just to, once again, tell me to "Wake Up!"

*I stand – waiting, listening deeply.
A feeling guides me to a land timeless and unplanned.
Brush, color and hand create in an unjudged harmony.
I am awake, alive, vibrating with vision.*

Softly the Muse just repeats, “Begin again.”



I wrote “Begin Again” in the summer of 1999, after my friend Dolores Forsythe and I set off for an adventure into painting. We were neither painters nor artists, but this workshop offered more of a process of self-discovery than painting or artistic competence. The poem captures the essence of that six-day experience, and I also find it calling me back repeatedly with new insights that apply to the rest of my life.

I described the birth of this poem in *Creative Expressions*, an unpublished manuscript, written in 2002:

Since we live in different cities, Dolores and I often took trips together, our gift to ourselves and to our friendship. Over the years, we have gone to spas and to professional development workshops. Gradually we realized that we both were more interested in deeper self- and spiritual-development. We chose this workshop because it offered a week of exploring self through painting, on one of the green islands north of Vancouver, B.C., where all the chores and distractions of daily living such as cooking, cleaning, television and telephones would be removed. Add to that the advantageous (for Americans!) exchange rates and we figured if we did not like the painting we could hike, talk, nap, talk, read and catch up on our talking! (Is there a pattern here?)

Stewart and Sonora Beam led the workshop, called [“The Painting Experience”](#) based on the book, *Life, Paint and Passion* by Stewart Cubley and Michelle Cassou, at the [Hollyhock](#) retreat center on Cortes Island. It is a magical place that stimulates peace, creative thought and poetry.

For six days we painted in 2-3 hour sessions three times a day in a total immersion process. There was always more paper, always more paint, always more time in this utterly safe environment. There was only one rule for the group: we could not comment on the paintings. We could not say something was bad, but what turned out to be even harder, we could not even say it was good.

My inner critic loses some of its power.

We could not say, “Oh what a cute dog,” or “I love that flower” or “Great color.” It took a lot of tongue biting, for this primarily female group of people pleasers, to refrain from complimenting people or acknowledging their efforts. I finally realized that my urge to comment on their paintings or their painting process was more about my own reactions and judgments than their need for feedback. By not voicing my judgments of their work, my internal critic seemed to lose some of its power to criticize my own work. Quiet settled inside of my head.

Stewart and Sonora wandered around the room, always available to stimulate our individual processes and help us listen to the feelings that would lead us into the next step of the process of the painting. However, they, frustratingly at times, remained totally neutral about the product of our paintings. I liked my third image of “The Bitch Goddess of Change.” I loved walking into the room, and see her standing there fierce and strong. It intrigued me to see images show

up that I did not understand, images that came from someplace unknown.

As I put her away and taped up the next empty sheets, however, I started to feel drained, empty and terrified. I felt pressure to create something that worked as well as the “Bitch Goddess,” but I also felt that I had nothing left to give. As I watched the progress on other people’s paintings, I noticed their freedom in allowing wild images to enter their paintings and take them places that I did not understand. I



saw paintings go from strikingly lovely pictures to strange, feral portraits of inner life. My inner life felt like thin oatmeal compared to these rich offerings.

My level of terror and emptiness shocked me. I spent much of my professional life studying and teaching in the field of creativity. I know the power of the inner critic. I know how hard it is to shut off that nagging voice of judgment. When I wrote my first book, *Mindmapping*, that voice yelled at me through a megaphone. It told me I had no right to be writing at all, let alone that book. I did not have the credentials, I was not a writer, no one would read it, I would say something stupid, and so on and so on. To drown out that voice, I would turn on Ray Lynch’s “Deep Breakfast,” put on headsets and pump up the volume as loud as I could tolerate. I probably lost some hearing, but I managed to write.

Now, in this strange territory, I listened to a critic with a new voice. A critic with even more credibility. I *really* did not know how to paint. I did not know how to let images that did not make logical sense onto the page or even into my mind. No one wanted to see this stuff. Just because I did one painting I liked, did not mean I could do it again. Lightning never strikes twice. I should just pack up my stuff and quit while I was ahead.

I want to flee, but know I can not.

To break through the terror, I took one of the largest brushes around and scribbled orange across the page. Mistake. My mind reeled looking for a toehold: creativity and play go together. So, I grabbed purple and started drawing toys, except I can not draw and now the page looked like an orange and purple nightmare. Blue. Blue, the complementary color to orange. I try to make something of this by painting the background blue until some idea comes to my rescue. One large section of the paper turns blue and then I stop. I know I am totally lost and living out the predictions of my inner critic.

Sonora stops beside me. I am trying to figure out how to get out of this mess. I just want to rip the page down and start over, but one of our instructions is that we have to talk with Stewart or Sonora to make sure a painting is finished. I know neither of them will let me off this easily. Irritation rises; I do not like where I am at and I know I have to face something ugly. I am supposed to be a star student, not just here but all through my life. Even if I do not have much painting talent, I am supposed to be accomplished at the process of creativity. I help people develop their creativity, now here I am frozen in fear and frustration by a bit of paper and children's tempera paint.

Sonora asks, "Where are you?"

As if she did not know. As if it were not perfectly obvious that I am in meltdown. I try to act calm and poised. I try to explain the reality that while everyone else in the room has all these creative images filling their pages, I have none. Everyone has to recognize their strengths and limitations and the truth is that I am just an empty shell with nothing but darkness inside. I start to go on, but Sonora asks:

“Do you dream?”

Yes, of course I dream. I have kept a dream journal for years (sporadically, of course) and often explore my dream images...

Dream images. Images that come from within, from some seemingly bottomless source, from somewhere within me. I understand immediately that she means if I can dream images, the images are within or through me and if I can let them come into my consciousness, I can paint them. I feel like I have been thrown a lifesaver, and acknowledge Sonora's help, trying not to reveal that I was seconds away from bolting. I go back to the painting and gradually a few images tiptoe their way through my mind and onto the page. The picture looks like a smashed car hulk where someone has banged the wrinkles out of one fender. It is still a wreck, but with more work, it might be a car again.

Stewart stops by and I give him a short, forced-cheerful history of my moment of insanity. He asks me if I want to continue with this picture. By now, I feel a perverse fondness for this ugly creation, and have mixed feelings about giving up on it. However, I acknowledge that I still have misgivings about starting again. I do not have any more confidence about beginning a new picture than I did with this one. Stewart says he would like to help me get past the blank canvas so I tape up another expanse of white paper. And, I wait.

Having Stewart wait with me makes me feel even more self-conscious and blocked. The dark, empty feeling is back.

Stewart asks me to describe the feeling. I am not used to describing my feelings. I just want this moment to end. Embarrassed and lost, I feel myself getting hotter as I struggle with Stewart's question. Suddenly the feeling of emptiness seems like a shell deep within me. I explain this to Stewart and he suggests that I start there and carefully, with a small brush, paint that feeling.

A strange thing happens.

Relieved to be left alone with a bit of an idea, I start and soon the painting starts to flow. I am caught up in a timelessness as I spend hours on one image that leads to another and then to another. The painting seems to transcend my limited skills. Colors seem to work better than before and somehow I find ways to express my feelings and my thoughts. At one point, I wanted to paint a pair of upraised hands catching the flow of blood from a pink rose (do not ask ... I have not figured out the symbolism myself yet!). The hands looked weird so I kept adding fingers until it looked like a mass of hands upraised. The resulting image pleased me even though I still can not logically explain it.

I spent the rest of the time at the workshop working on this painting, utterly engrossed in the flow of images, but when the workshop ended, the painting was still incomplete. For several reasons I did not plan to continue the painting process when I returned home: I am primarily a writer and did not think I should take time away from that; I have started many art processes in my time, generally not getting much further than buying the materials; and I lived in a small house with no immediately apparent space to paint.

However, the unfinished painting continued to call to me so I finally went out and bought paint, paper and brushes. I found that I could tape the paper to a large sheet of white cardboard on the back of the kitchen door and paint perfectly well, even fixing dinner between brush strokes. I worked on the painting until it finally felt complete with a title of “The Cycle of Creativity.”

For a while I thought that ended it. Then one day, while walking Rumble through the park, a poem with the same title started dropping into my brain and completed itself by the time I reached home. After that, images from paintings began flowing into poems and poems transforming themselves into paintings. It felt more like receiving than consciously writing the words and creating the images.



- ❖ Where do you need to “begin again?”
- ❖ How do you feel about letting go of your sense of control and just following the path where it leads you?
- ❖ What brings you power and strength?

One of the most powerful lessons I learned many years ago came from a quote by Mary Catherine Bateson:

“Our species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories.”

I have thought often about the metaphor of the onion with its multitude of layers. It is an appropriate metaphor except, with an onion, every layer is the same only smaller. In the onion that we are, every layer is different ... different colors, different textures, different thicknesses. We Are more like a fractal pattern where every time you zoom in, you see a different pattern. Maybe we are a fractal onion ... every time we peel away a layer, we see a new and surprisingly beautiful pattern.

The Painting Experience revealed layers of myself that I had never seen before. It also gave me a metaphor for living ... taking one step at a time, listening for what wants to come next and then taking the next step. It is not the strategic planning process I learned in my business life, but I do not think it is an either/or.

There are times when looking at the future and carefully charting a path in the right direction is the best thing to do. Sometimes we know we are being called to something new, but we do not know where it is or how to get there. No amount of strategic planning could get us there so we have to follow our inner voice and move one step at a time, confident that wherever we wind up will be exactly the right place.

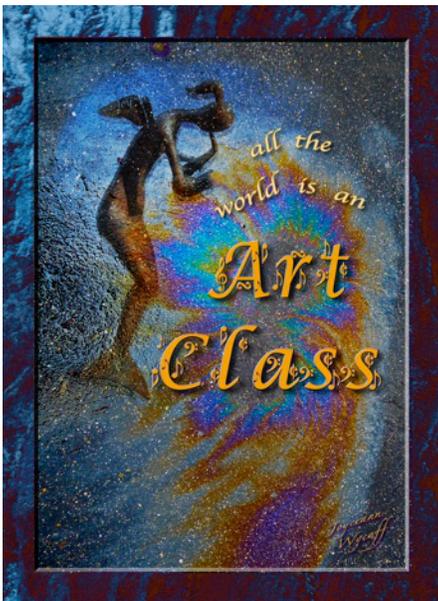
Released from my own judgment that I could not draw (it did not matter) and the judgment of others, “The Bitch Goddess of Change” came into my life. She gave me power and strength, strength I would need for the challenges to come. And, “The Cycle of Creativity” embedded in me an understanding of a step-by-step approach to following life’s path.

The Painting Experience process of waiting until something spoke to me and then taking one step at a time as the path unfolded

fascinated me, and I began to experiment with it in other areas of my life. Rather than starting with a future goal and working backwards to a series of steps that would theoretically take me there, I tried following breadcrumbs of passion and curiosity. The uncertainty and feeling of not being in control threw me back into my old plan-it-forward mindset many times over the following years. But, I knew there was something magic about following a path to an unknown future, so I kept trying.

After Richard died, I didn't have the strength or will to plan anything, so I wound up taking one step at a time depending upon what brought me joy in the moment. I didn't realize it until much later, but I was following the painting experience process.

About this Image: *All the World Is an Art Class*



One morning, just before going to sit at [Timberline Art Gallery](#), where I am a member, I stopped at a garage sale and found a small acrylic picture frame with colorful crayons embedded in it. The colorful frame prompted the thought that art and creativity are everywhere. And from that thought came this image which joins a photo of an oil slick on the driveway of a local gas station after a rain with a beach statue in Puerto